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The Tower 2012

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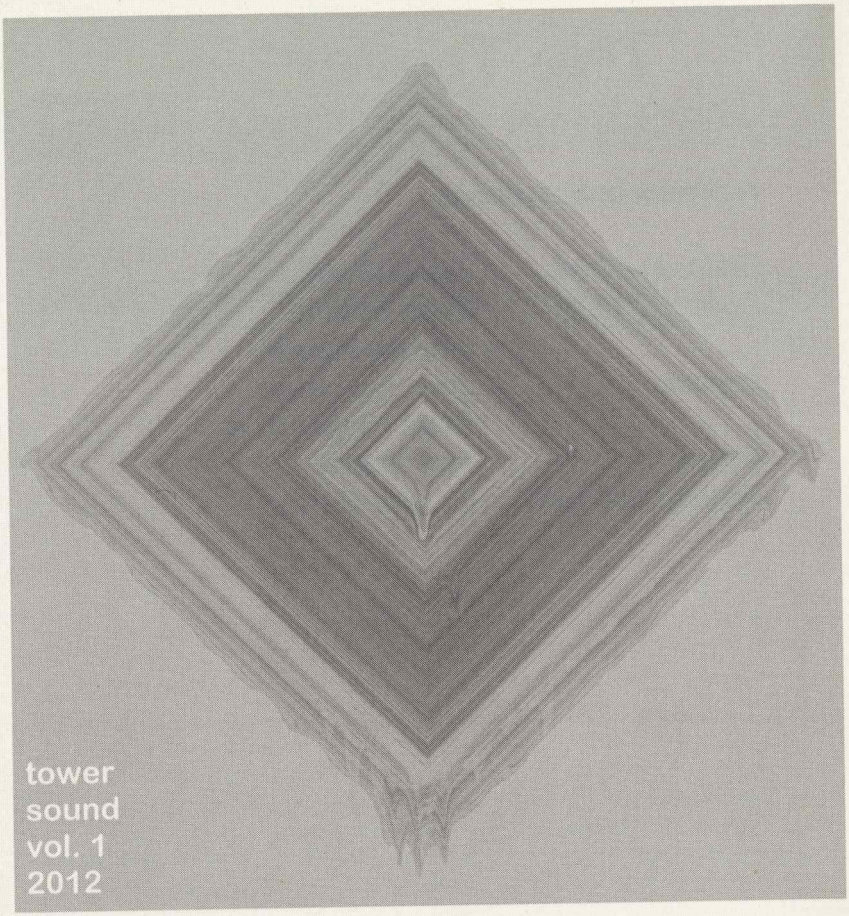

For the first time in The Tower's history, we are offering a section of music and sounds created by the minds of UM students. The music is freely available to listen and download at this address:

http://thetowermusic.bandcamp.com/

Sleeping

Hannah Allen

Tired.
Slipping.
Falling
Down slowly.
Sinking into it and drifting away,
away, away.
Away to somewhere maybe.
Or not.
Spinning around
Inside my toothpaste brain
There are strange things
Like -

What?
Oh yeah, like
Dragons eating
Comforters folding around me
Are waves but I can still
Breathe in this strange planet
Where I can fly sometimes
In libraries there are dinosaurs
And zombies chasing me through
My old church and that strange man
Is there
Is there.
Roll over.
Sigh.
Blank.

Beep! Beep! Beep!
It's morning again.
What on earth did I eat last night?
Strange dreams.
Death Is No Desire

I don't have any
Unfinished business

To make me want tomorrow -

No songs to sing,
No people to see,
No story to tell,
No one to be.

I don't have any
Desire to stay,
To wait for my train to come -

Nowhere to go,
Nothing to hope,
No one to grow
Old for or with.

I don't have any
Picture in my head
To show me what to wait for -

No memory
Of what I want
To someday be;
No good old age.

I don't have any
Fire in my bones
To drive and draw me forward -

No drums in my chest,
No spurs on my back
To keep me from rest;
No strong battle cry

Now all I have left
Is hope of sweet rest,
To give me strength in the end -

A song that I heard
Once in a church,
And a box that my
Father once gave me.

Biking on a Back Road in DeKalb County, Alabama, After a Tornado

Smell of broken pine and crushed honeysuckle,
Wood smoke and a hint of diesel fuel.
Wind in my ear, asphalt popping beneath
My wheels and a dog barking.
A tangled wind chime that made
Not a sound when the black winds came.
Somewhere, a hammer and a saw.
All is silent here, at the end of the road.

At the end of the road are
The mass graves of twisted, jumbled bones
And jigsaw pieces of what once was
Everything to someone.
Picked out by my ashamed eyes
There - a box of Clariten, a toilet bowl,
A crushed game station, a couch, the table
Someone tried to hide under, shattered
Glass scattered like seeds of light,
And more and more and more
Piled like - burial mounds.

I feel peaceful here, at the end of the road.
Here, where all have long gone now -
One way or another.
There is rest for me here, who lost nothing.
My legs cease to burn and my blood slows and
I listen to the silence.
Later I will feel ashamed for
Enjoying the silence of the recently voiceless.
I turn my wheels and now
The end of the road is the beginning.

A Sketch of My Grandfather

The trees lined up row upon row, surrounding us with their glossy leaves and lichen-patched boughs and thick, musty smell. Fruit hung form their branches like Christmas ornaments. The best ones were always the highest, the brightest ones always almost out of reach.

But we were good climbers. We knew how to tell which branches were strong enough to hold us. We knew how to twist between tight crooks. We knew how to balance to stretch for the farthest fruits. We knew how to take turns standing beneath the tree, and shaking the limbs; so even the ones we couldn't get – we got.

If we were impatient we didn't mind bringing away stems and leaves too. But if were cared to do it right, we twisted and snapped away each fruit to leave a little button on top. Then dropped them into plastic Walmart bags.

Grampa waited for us below. We piled our bags onto the back of his truck, then gathered around to enjoy our reward.

We dug into the peels with our chewed-off fingernails. A little juice oozed out, but mostly we just got sticky, starchy stuff under nails.

"Don't you girls know how to peel an orange?" Grampa said.

He sliced a hole out of the top with his pocket-knife. Juice flowed over his gnarled, old hands. He sucked out the juice and spat out the seeds.

He cut open our oranges too. Three of us, on the back of a truck, in some uncle's orange grove, sucking out the juice and spitting out the seeds.

A Sketch of Alabama

I love how red the dirt is around here. It reminds me of my cousin's hair when he was younger. I used to think it was sad. Like the dirt was so red because of all the blood that went into it – black and white – in our poor luck past.

And maybe it is still a little bit of that.

But you know, the dirt is soft too. Really, go on, rub your fingers in it, dust it all over your hands. It's soft enough to roll in, if humans were less dignified.

But if you dig around too much in it, you'll find that it's rough too. It will wear down the skin around your fingernails, so even though your hands are red as murder, they'll feel clean and purged.

And it's sticky, when it's wet. It'll stick to your fingers like red dry-wall putty, to your shoes even worse. Gardening in this stuff's the best.

Also because it grows things. You wouldn't think it, just by looking – so rusty and hostile. But then again, it must be. What else could be supporting all this kudzoo? Not to mention the lob-lolly and all the oaks, the red cedar, dogwood, and the corn. Really now, have you seen our corn this year? I swear, that has got to be God's favorite green. Green and blue, bright as summer.

And red. Exactly the color of rust. The color of hard Southern history, of familiar comforts, of dig-in-tough grit, and of slowly, silently growing things.

Christopher Holder

Flyaway—Halt—!

Routinely getting little sleep
And finding incandescent scenes.
Imagined, scattered powder steeps,
Orchestral brass play sub-known dreams.
One's mind defines, irrelevance seeps,
And burrows dig while organs steam.
Without mind's walls time's rut moves deep;
A frantic time within's unseamed,
Scared jolted awake one grips what seems.

Living is not for some of the live

Living is not for some of the live,
Extraction is done by the few;
When one may act or equally fly,
The many are woefully skewed.
And when one speaks of piercing eyes,
Of shared love conspicuously true,
One speaks as well of selfish flight,
One knows the conscious nude.

And when coercion bends one's knee,
When tears seem futile and clean,
These worthy have learned to frown and scream,
The crowded are loathe to be seen.

These crowds do exist in wise diatribes,
But they vastly soon exit the scene;
Reality's soulful are standing by,
The ones for whom 'I' sings.

To close, to finish, condemn and deny,
I offer you this final stream:
Name a work that's caught your mind
That glorifies man obscene.

Priorities

Chilly autumn air surrounds a hue of dying leaves;
You find yourself in the best of seasons wanting to be free;

So come on inside and smell the food sitting out in plastic bags;
Leave out the rhyme, find out the reason,
And freedom will find itself.

Art of War

orange-petaled flowers bloom
in the desert—they are deadly—
war-crazed men attack too soon
to be struck down far too readily
to see all this happen to a monstrous tune
some people call art of war...
it's art marching off to certain doom?
it chills me right to the core.

The Teacher

Please tell me, teach, I'd like to know:
What graces from your head do grow?
What lights upon your frontal cortex,
Forehead masking mind non-perplexed?

Now, what is it that evades your senses,
Makes you strain your mental fitness,
Collapses certain suppositions,
Gives you nonplussed thoughts of fiction?

Tell me, sir, in phrases cogent:
Do you whisper, features frozen,
Half-forgot essential axioms
You'd recall if yet you'd passed them
Through that brilliant writing mind,
That steady wealth of well-lit signs?

Tell one and all who claim to want it
Your unfettered truth, your honest
Fully integrated knowledge,
Free of charge save in the spirit:
We all of us must think to hear it.

What if I could never-sleep?

What if I could never-sleep?
What of me, perpetual?
How long would I last in steep?
How soon would I complete?

What I could accomplish then!
The nothing and the everything:
The nothing, it would be open;
The all, it would be bleak.

Detego Detectum

Aida Dabit

See you when I'm freshly showered and deeply in love with what I reconstructed you to be, things I can't even remember if you actually are or if they're just what I've made up or dreamed while you were asleep, too, your eyes partially open like a child's.

I'd buy you out but you wouldn't mean as much. I've got the currency. I've got the cash. I'd rent your body, kiss your corpus. There's that Latin again.

The Y-Shaped man with the hollow-heart, small of back, and my fingernail down the middle.
Dirty feet, bruised arm, you sweat sweet onto my sheets.

I'm pretty sure our short story ends with me in flames and your teeth gleaming white in the light.

NOLA

Aida Dabit

The air's spicy and I thought I smelled you last night outside the voodoo shop on Bourbon, thought I saw you on Chartres in the throngs, in the crowd, and you're beautiful, deceptive, pinks and browns, and all the alcohol and the smell of pot and smoke and the taste of food, it's all you and I'm creative, brilliant, shining next to the blinding Mississippi, while I try to make you lovemethinkmeneedmebreatheme the way I do you.

Diddlysplit

"No Name"

Shaghaied on a mountain top too high
Getting tired of fending off death each night
And just when he came to camp

We remembered
We could fly

Scampered off the mountain top
Spent a week gliding
And when we landed we found ourselves stranded in the desert fire
Where the men cover their faces, as if trying to hide from times advances

They didn't like us there amongst the sands
Said something about our eyes
Glancing too quick

And just then we remembered
We could swim

So we took a leap
Right into the ocean

Conversed with schools of all colors and shapes
Turned all sorts of heads and fins
Hell, they thought we were great
But its said see, for the time was running thin
Not to mention our oxygen supply
Was long done spent
I'm afraid our swim was at an end

And just then
We remembered
We could run

So we dragged our pruned selves back upon the shore
Back to where
we all came from

It was different now
A lot had chanced since we decided to take a hike up that hill
A lot was dead, a lot had been killed
We searched for days among all the sad stray faces,
trying to figure out what had happened to all the good graces

and why anyone would want to take them?

All that was left now was bones & relics of the past
Reminders of the world, before it started moving so goddamn fast

"That's it!"
one in the party said
they must of fallen off
spun right into oblivion!

"Well shit son"
"Let's go get em"

and that's when we remembered
we could build

The plans were grand
Calling for a sort of cannon
A great gun
Capable of blasting you to the sun
Big enough to hold an army or three
It took every bit of everything left
But we didn't care goddamnit
We were aiming for that half-air
That spot right between earth and space
That was where
We were going to find grace

Cut down a forest, used it to burn a lake
Heating till the point it was ready to explode
oh yes.
It was time to go

We grabbed our nets, for how else were we supposed to catch
And all hopped in the cannon
With no regrets

BOOM
Bellowed a sound that I watched level three towns

As we spiraled towards to the sun
Back this time to where all the earth hailed from
But something was wrong
And then I heard gravity's song

And that's when we remembered
We fall

The descent took three days
But my ambition remained unphased
I just clutched my net waiting for the floor
No regret
As the ground came into focus
I noticed
It looked awfully familiar
Like a mountain we may have once upon stepped

And then I was sure, for I saw our camp
Strange part was there was till a lamp lit

And that's when we remembered
We forgot about death
Good thing he waited for us

A Mountain Man's Lament

Joel Dunaway

To Hell with you,
Men who are afraid of your own facial hair.
Go kill something; be Men.
Sex & Violence is the Game.
There isn't enough Testosterone in America anymore.
Consumerism has Emasculated us. Go
Rip something apart with your bare hands:
Cut the Testicles of a Bull off
With a Rusty Razorblade.
Take your clothes off; go into the Wild.
Run Naked through the Mountains
Like the wolf inside Howls for.
Emerge from the Wilderness:
Blood dripping from Fresh Wounds;
Don't bandage them.
Let It Bleed.

Women care about dirty clothes
Or food sticking to facial hair.
There are enough Women,
And not enough real Men in America
Who don't notice the Grease
Under their Fingernails
From Wrestlin' a Car's Engine,
Or Dirt in their hair
From bein' thrown from a Horse.

Build a Fire.
Do Dangerous Things.
Be Dangerous.
Sweat, Stink like a Man.
Become Savage.
Conquer a Beast Every Day.
Be a Cowboy.
Get Angry.
Kick Something.
Go Rattlesnake Hunting.

Ride Bulls, and

Hitchhike for your Thrills
Fight. Eat Raw Onions. Workout:
Release the god in You.
Read the Bible; go to a church,
Educate yourself.
Real Men have Brains,
And Brawn.
Abstain from pleasure and comfort.
Take cold Showers.
Build something with your hands,
Then burn it to the mothafuckin ground.

Improperly use fireworks.
Break rules, Break Bones, Break beds, and
Don't use your Brakes.
Don't sit at home playing video games
Vicariously living through yer tv sets.
Don't be your boss's Bitch.
Grow a Beard;
Fuck corporate.
Be an Outlaw.
Listen to Merle Haggard in yer Workshop,
And 2pac at the Gym.

Take a walk on the Wild side, or
Be Wilde on the Sidewalk ya' take,
And don't sit around
Wondering how to please yer Woman;
Go out and show her
How you can Please her.
Live in the Woods;
Arise into Civilization.
Do what we have to do in the 21st Century:
Jump through hoops, be nice, fill out mountains of paperwork, don't hit anyone, etc...
Then Club yer Woman
And Drag her Into the Woods.

If...
You strive to Respect like Kipling,
Work like Steinbeck,
Live like London,
Imagine as Tolkien,
Love like Shakespeare,
Push the Limits like Thompson,

Party like Kerouac, and
Dream like MLKJ
Then you will be a Man...
One day.

1st Words

Alexis Duncan

Cleary mediocre, writing in a sense. Words on a page that may never be spoken. Never written in a final book. Floating in space. Words that in all honesty were never meant to be there. Never meant to be written, never spoken, never meant to grace the lips of some unforeseen mortal with their sweet caress.

Why, these words just dance around us all. They make no sense to any. They become hateful. Filled with spite. Just words – or are they more. Are they the shadows of our memories that haunt us, they mock us with their directness, their decisive endings. They are not connected to any other words, they stand by themselves, proud. A word that depends on others is no word at all.

Clearly mediocre, words in a way. We have no way of knowing what they are really capable of. Are we the ones that control the words. Or do they rule our lives with their twisted letters. Are there other ways for us to communicate...

Cleary distorted, our sense of power.

Untitled

Life is a field
Standing in that field surrounded by the soulless decaying flesh
the lightning, the fire, the noise, the chaos
the only thing worse is the eerie quiet that envelopes you.
the stillness, loneliness, the end

Anger, burning red
emptiness
the loss of emotion
the cooling numb in your flesh
air forced into your lungs
the will to live
the urge to survive
the longing
if only

Hope is an ocean
floating in that ocean
drowning in that ocean
fighting against currents
the struggle against the hope that you believe in so much
nothing ever ends well.
blood in your veins, on your hands
you taste your life leaving

sinking, drowning, the pain of your lungs fighting for air

Peace

the rays of the sun embrace you in the cold depths of the water.
the quiet, the empty, the stillness

suspended in the freezing

eyes glassy
the will
the hope
survival
they are no more ...
A vicious cycle
Death is a snowflake

one of millions
no different from the ones
before
or after
a snowflake on the field that we call life

Distractions

As I sit at this desk that is not my own
I look around the room,

A song runs through my head
More like a line
over and over, till something briefly
catches my attention

a fly on the wall
a leaf on a tree
something shiny in the corner of my eye
the ever-present squirrel

the tick tock tick tock of a clock in the room
too quiet
the song gets louder
paper shuffles
chairs squeak
pencils scrape across paper
a sneeze
(bless you)
plastic rattles
my attention is stolen
over and over again
is it actually mine?

But then-
Hey! what's that?

it was a watch
a digital watch mind you
but just a watch all the same

Bright green textbooks

a yellow smiley face
thoughts of cats at home
an orange shoe
a green-
well I had a word in my mind
but my attention was stolen

GUM WRAPPER!!!

a purple pen
a yellow chicken

the list goes on and on

it is

a never ending list of things
that catch my-
SQUIRREL!

Ergatherspenc

Tanner Logan

You can indulge yourself
And always be fully entertained
Spending time on the
Banks of the Brisbane River

We had questions to answer
There is much to do
In the world

As they migrated by
Along the shores of Moreton Bay
We were overwhelmed

[The title is the username of a spam-bot
whose message was rearranged to form this poem]

Folmar

Olivia

An study in expectations

Other men have occupied my dreams
other fingers have played at my heartstrings
other names have made my lungs deflate
other plans of the future have filled my slate.
I have wanted men who were nothing like you
and putting aside shame I fell to pursuit
carefully constructing diagrams in my brain
but reality never could be the same.
I've designed men taller, more brooding, that I wanted
dreamt of them holding me at night undaunted
or kissing my temples or stroking my cheek
or asking me the mundane details of my week.
I've thought of all these men, all wanted, all mine
what I realize now is that they were a waste of time
because you are just tall enough, and I much prefer lighthearted
and your arms are stronger than the visions I've imparted
your kisses chase my headaches back to hell from which they came
and all my muscles relax when you whisper my name.
What sets you apart from these illusions aloof
is the question of want, and I don't want you
not at all, it's not a matter of preference—
you're real, I love you, I need you, and that makes all the difference.

****

A study in loneliness

Can't get to sleep tonight, even though

monstrous yawns suck air in desperately

like a howling gale out at sea

and it's 12:26 a.m.

Ten fingers, ten toes, twenty-twenty vision

(with glasses), two arms, two legs.

Everything's fine, just fine

except for the fact that I've been cleaved in two.

During the day I sometimes forget this little fact,

misplace the memory of being pulled in half

with keeping busy and being angry at stupid things,

watching insipid shows on television until

my mind numbs. Nothing really helps, though.

As the sun sinks lower and the noises die down,

the laughter subsides under blankets and

clicking of alarm clocks being set

I remember the jagged edge of me.

Two pennies stuck together with years of grime

ripped apart, a hand stuck in a stubborn jar

broken free, a seatbelt stuck in the door of a moving car

yanked inside against its will.

I want to hold on to you again, create new grime,

explore a different jar, slam another door.

Instead I meld myself to a shapeless pillow.

I'll be okay, I whisper. I don't much care for lying,

but you gotta do what you gotta do,

Darwinism and all that.

******

The aftermath of an argument

I think about your dark head resting

against a pillow that's not next to my own.

I guess it doesn't matter anyway,

whether you're sleeping next to me or not,

for in my unconscious state, would I even notice

the absence of your sleeping form

curled up next to mine?

Would I even realize that our legs

aren't intertwined, that instead of

your rough chest, I feel soft silk against

my cheek, and silence rings in my

ears instead of your deafening heartbeat?

Could I not just pile on another quilt,

put on socks made of wool?

Could I not just leave the TV on

hoping that I could fool my ears

into thinking that the cooking show is

you whispering sweet words?

Would such a thing really be that absurd?

Tonight, I'm warm and comfortable enough

I suppose. My room is nice and toasty,

none of my flesh exposed to the frigid

winter outside, and the TV dins in

the quiet, and two pillows grab my feet

where usually yours would meet

and everything is replicated

but nothing is the same.

Jessica Hamlin

jen

Oh lovely fallen angel
You follow no man
They're beneath you
Although you walk among them now
They try to trap you,
Enslave you,
For three quick tricks
And bottle you back up
Think you to be a Monster,
Because you burn to the touch
Though they forget it's how hot you are that drew them to you in the first place.
They forget that you're an Angel, though fallen, and you were there when they were created
From the dirt that now flick off your shoulders.
You slip through their fingers when they try to understand
why you don't want to get on your knees before them,
call them Master
Nod your head back and forth
And make all their wet dreams come true.
You can't help it you don't stoop that low for them,
They just rub you the wrong way.

TV Land Delusions

My mother is a polygamist
I don't know how to respond to this.

It's Odd, never saw her on Three's Company. It fits her though. Too long was she Dick Van Dyke's black and white wife. When she went to color in her own show it made her too daring. The technicolor saturated all the wrong and dulled all the right. Course, that didn't happen until Dick Van Dyke turned into coarse Archie Bunker over night. Always yelling and screaming, "It's all right! Everything's fine in Mayberry! The sheriff is most definitely not holding a gun!" Always whistling that theme song by my bedroom door, right out of sight. It scared me, I think he thought

that I was Aunt Bee. But I wasn't a part of that fishing hole fantasy, I was all too aware of the color all around me, of the toilets flushing in the background. I tried painting my fat black and tried to bleach the guilt I carried white, tried to turn back the hands of time, tried to become silver, always dragged sensible friends along, always tried to have a Ball, always tried to be in the show tonight, always embarrassed myself but that was alright, I was a part of the joke and I always got my silky heart credits.

But life isn't about silky heart credits

And you are robbed of your TV Land delusions

When your mother announces

That she's a polygamist.

Hypochondria

Jessica Harrington

Because I could Not stop for Death-
He tried to stop for Me-
I then held Up my hand and said-
No thank you- Now please leave.

But Death was not to be deterred-
He followed Me from There-
And would peer through My windows and-
Whisper into My ear.

He waited for Me- by the Door-
And sat atop my bed-
He would wave at Me while I ate-
And play Games with my head.

Usually I would ignore-
His presence in My Life-
But other times I would Fight back-
With Medicinal might.

At these times- When I would attack-
He would draw Back in pain-
But then He would come back Again-
And continue the Game.

For years I Lived in His shadow-
Unable to break Free-
It seemed I would be Stuck running-
For all Eternity.

But in the End- Death always Wins-
And so he did with Me-
He took me gently by the Hand-
And away He led Me.

Away from everything I'd known-
Away from sun and sea-
Away from Flesh and Blood and Bone-
Away from Everything.

My whole life had been Spent fighting-
A battle I would Lose-
And now I see there is nothing-
There's nothing- I can Do.

It came too late within the Game-
To have this Sudden thought-
The Game was done- And I had Lost-
My life had been for Naught!

The Greed

Artemus Hill

I want it all give me more
As I go in to rob this store
I have money to buy it but I don't care
Because I just wanna get rid of my despair

I feel empty inside so I cling to possessions
Going day by day fulfilling my obsessions.
Buying whatever I want whenever I want
Because all I really like to do is flaunt

If I can't have it then I'll take it
Give me more and it becomes my habit.
I'm watching out for cops because jail is lame
Conning everybody into players of my game.

Playing my game means losing equals winning
Because you losing your stuff is me grinning.
Greed is color blind so don't think you can save face
I'm just acquiring what I want until I find my place.

I think I found my place and now I have gone crazy
Because of my kleptomania my mind is all hazy
I robbed everybody and now everyone hate me
I wanted everything and now I'm broke and lonely.

The Wrath

Artemus Hill

I used to love my friends and family
Until they did me wrong and dirty.
I hate all of them and don't wanna see them
And If I do I'll cause lots of mayhem

Now you're wondering why I'm mad
Because they told on me when I killed my dad.
Because they didn't know he abused me as a kid
I had no choice, but to do what I did

Went to jail for 10 years and then I got out
Prayed to God about everybody but I had doubt.
Thought about them and then came frustration,
And that's when I knew my next destination.

Went to their house and crashed their little party
When they saw me they tried to act all hearty
But I knew it was an act so I did take action,
and you can bet money it was the perfect reaction.

I killed them all and on them I unleashed my wrath,
Because in that room I left a bloodbath.
My anger got the best of me, but I don't care
And when did the deed not once I shed a tear.

Eventually the cops found out and I was guilty,
But it didn't matter because this world is filthy.
So now I'm on death row waiting to be executed
Goodbye crazy world that had me persecuted.

Adam Huddleston

Cherubim

He blew on in

Great cloud
Southbound
Whirlwind

Is this a golden Cherubim?
Old folks never heard such words spoke;
That man'll shine a halo 'til it glows!

And they'd never tasted honey in a sermon.

He took 'em out to the waters that run,
Dipped in the river, one by one;
The old Baptist Beetles forgot how to swim.
Drownt in the river by a Cherubim.

Saturday night, I was surprised to find
His light beneath a bushel where I'd spent some time;
Early next morning, he's the star of the show.
That man'll shine a (hubcap) to a heav'nly glow!

Angel on his knees
Scrapin' gold off the streets.
Never thought a Cherubim
Could be so weak.

Faces

Adam Huddleston

In the rippling pond
My countless reflections;
Warped distortions of my visage.

I remembered them all
And forged their expressions,
Giving form to illusory image.

Now on my back
In a towering pack
Are ten thousand iron masks.

The burden-
I sweat
I climb
I pray

Up and down the mountain spine
A hundred times a day.
I stop to swap my face
For every traveler on the way.

Touch

Adam Huddleston

I feel death like flesh through fabric.

Soft cloth separates hands from hips,
None but thin threads keep seeking lips
From falling on cotton covered breasts;
A brittle barrier cloaks the virgin death.

Teased fingers trace figures across tight fibers,
Discovering dark moist places desired.

Ode to Mr. Bones

Matthew M. A. Phillips

...on to logical arguments,
than which nothing greater
can be conceived.
To be perfect is to be believed.
Islands full of pup tents,
with nothing in the refrigerator.

Be cause of mo re logical arguments,
(Summa Theologica,
split five ways.
Move, Mover!) the bachelor pays.
The shore shells evidence.
Told 'ya.

Better to be in reality
than in the mind?
Raphael, Donatello,
Michelangelo, Leonardo.
I've got your sense of morality:
Leave the old rat behind.

Marooned By The Ship We Burnt

C.W. Newell

From a rooftop tar island,
the archipelago, endless in the diesel mist
stands stiffly as the evening eye sets and tires.
The city exhales brown and red,
the city exhales tales of flickering civic constellations,
none of the Hunter
but of wax fruits.

From cobblestone beach,
roams new Crusoe alone to find old steps,
home to old insular myths no longer told.
Myths of an end never ending
tales more true than truth.

Under a sodium vapor lamp,
the sulfur beams beckon him to slumber.
Vignettes around the eyes,
vision closing around a ship.

Black as dried blood but the sky still scarlet,
floating in the mind's isle,
on the street hidden beneath every brick and grit are the burnt sea
splinters seldom stepped on,
it fits the flesh well,
the echoing howl is held in,
we sit rubbing our soles while we are marooned by the ship we
burnt.

Dew shines and the bench yawns,
he awakes with bare feet,
a thief thought boots to be better his,
new Crusoe studied the sidewalk
and knew no shoes to protect his soles from the city.

Crad Poem

Holly Parker

Words can't express the thoughts I want to share about what you mean to me
you make me feel wonderfully poetic and beautifully free

like the sun on the water reflecting pure harmony
a string of lights made by so many memories

I appreciate the ways you invested in me
being a part of my glorious melody

Pieces and fragments all collide
into a mosaic created from the journey of the ride

Thriller, mystery and suspense
nonfiction—a story yet to have an end

You make up the soundtrack so sweet to hear
a photograph remembered from another place and a different year

Each life really does touch so many others in time
an endless tune of perfect rhythm and rhyme

It took someone like you to make me understand
God had us cross paths with a definite plan

The soul of a poet simply believes
follow your heart and there's no telling what you'll see
Thank you forever for the part you played in what I will turn out to be

A priori

Evan Patton

i am holding something
in my hands,
behind my back.
It is not big or small.
It does not have color.
It does not make sound.
It does not have flavor.
It does not have texture.
It does not make odor.
It does not exist.
It is something.
It is anything.
It is nothing.

The Common House Cricket

Evan Patton

crawling, mandible agape
in a horizontal assault,
gathering all things in
with a desperate immediacy,
the mouth that could never speak,
gasping for waves of sound,
air like plankton.
back legs dragging
behind an abdomen
of ornate intricacy,
light brown lines
bending into a pattern
reminiscent of a butterfly
wrapped in the dripping
wings of waiting,
chrysallized- contained
neither here nor there.
And the outlets bleed
a screaming silence,
penance for the life lived
echoing the hollows
of the mouth
which never speaks.

Transubstantiation

Evan Patton

from such blessed slumber
returns the vow-
spilling from mouths like
streams of blood flowing
in a double helix around
ropes of saliva,
oil and wine
vomited from child
out- out of mouths
pour forth in communion-
into the waiting beaks of
bluebirds perched,
bobble heads tilted
up- up
hunger and thirst
endowing falling liquid
with the ripeness of
last century's grape.
And do the lovebirds taste?
the same Jesus?
of what flavor?
Pink becomes pools
of liquid stagnant in the
waiting beaks of
bluebirds perched
on August Ginko branches,
song rippling waves
harpooned through
the milky translucence.
The guttural
growling of
song birds
piercing notes
under a Raven's
eye moon
mocked by
bellies distending
into the night.

When We Fall Asleep

Latoya Peeples

When we Fall Asleep – There goes our mind
Whisking us along with it or leaving us behind

When we Fall Asleep – It all fades away
Or comes into fruition, extending an already exhausting day

When we Fall Asleep – we escape the living void
Arriving at a world, all luxuries bestowed, a glorious reigning Lord

When We Fall Asleep – leaving a place so nice & lovely
Then enter into a secret realm, disgusting, despicable, and ugly

When We Fall Asleep – our eyes can be wide open
Or they can be wide shut; it can prove to be an awakening or a crutch

When We Fall Asleep – we are neither here nor there
For we defy time & space, occupying everywhere

When We Fall Asleep – some wake up and some never do
It's determined by our decisions made in life –
The Journey, Determined by You

All Your Good

Dedicated to Bettye H. Peeples

I think of all your Goodness, and what you've done for me
Nurturing in action – and exemplary Model for a child to see

You Give until you give out, then you Give some more
It leaves no mystery to ponder why; the Universe opens so many doors

Doors open with disbelief - questions of how it was achieved
One glimpse of your life reveals –
it's through your Faith and through all that you believe

You are Solid as a Rock and your Strengths shine through
Although it sometimes go unnoticed all the things that you do

I witness your hurt, and you pain alone
Do you honestly feel in your heart those things can all be gone?

You are quite tough, one like no other
Strength, Long Suffering, Love –
Everything that constitutes a True Mother

If I don't say it enough,
I Bless you with Holistic Wealth through thought
I have not forgotten the sense of Service, acts of Missions you've taught

To you might be contrary, but I think you're Smart & Beautiful too
I Take Pride in knowing, that All My Good was Passed from You

Dedicated to Bettye H. Peeples

In Memory of Rachel Ward

Laura Quattrochi

She absorbs the mourning tears deep in her roots
Her vines begin to wither
She has finished her stay here on Earth

Although her vines are weak
Her flowers begin to blossom
They bloom into a new life

As she stiffens,
The Heavens shine down on her trunk
To provide her branches strength

Even though her body is still
She remains living through her roots
They will forever grow

Rachel is to remain living through you

Lyrics

Chereey Strong

Those lyrics calm my soul
Like the ginger, red beautiful horizon
Like the turquoise, slow dancing waters
Those lyrics taste like sugar
Filling my tongue with the overflow of caramel
Those lyrics feel like cotton
Warming my skin so softly
Caressing my flesh so tenderly
My nerves spin so fondly
Like a cheerful goldfish swimming in the blue sparkling water
Those lyrics smell like sweet honeysuckle
Opening my nostrils to a world of blooming perfumes
Those lyrics sound so lovely
Shaping my eardrums into a wide bright star
Those lyrics paint my heart
Pink, purple, orange and turquoise
And with all the colors that ever so smile
Those lyrics massage my mind
Tracing my brain back to the moments that drew all angles of my heart
The moments that placed my heart near the sun
The moments that carried my heart through the heaviest storms.
Those lyrics bring such tears to my eyes
Many songs have beautiful harmonies
Many times I tune into rhythm
But little did I know of the sweet, truth and peace
That would lead me to a rainbow
And fill my eyes with such honey tears.

Weight of a Hill

Travis Swinford

I was attempting
to let myself slowly slip
from flowers half-watered
by some old leaky drip.

Therein a young boy,
in a breeze, there he wept:
My silent inner-words need their life
and hands held, close kept.

He often layed quiet. His
mind-mother held his cup
which broke into the shifted soil
his heart-swells lifted up.

Strong nose born of death,
those strangeless cloudy eyes
Let this gentle pressure be enough,
for you to open the skies.

Forged Closing Number

Travis Swinford

Feel long, look longer through ifs
(A.) This stake is made to fit well.
Some corners nod off with their dread
Lie so late-thought— you were dead,
Thaw'd n hell.— (sift)
Woven position was made so stiff.

Apollo-dinged 'Oh!' are perhaps if there is only two
then carry me when candles refuse the wind.
(Á.) whisper wills but only to naught,
once secret rivers froze n caught.
Shimmering approach, I'm invited to send
lent towards, reward, surging: A rock and a shoe.

A-front-talking actors have been dead for years.
Follow an isle only—who would want applause come
ready to bow, to—uh-ah—"it's stage"!
Look and wait; jealous answers are in the cave.
One step further or a pamphlet full of claws
(Best questions come, for others, disappear)

Drunks Dream of Drinking

Ethan Taylor

Benton swore to the wind through smoke
and liquor, sweetly Coked; he wished
to walk the floor until he fell
asleep and asked the children—
What's the doojer? and Howda fishes dó float?
—Them's cigarettes floatin', not fish.

—In the sea? With the lady
liquor store clerk? —In the coffee, mister,
and the bowl for the fishes, see?
Then Benton bonked his head on the toilet
and dreamt of boats on coffee with her,
and puked his whiskey out before the day.

Awake without rememb'ring, did
he wake at all? Forgotten,
Benton, forgetting how
to walk along the gunnels and the bow,
as a ghost past newly never-known men,
curst & drinkt & smokt as he did.

Language

Ethan Taylor

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is
as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip
of my words. My language trembles with desire.
-Roland Barthes

My language is a skin I have outgrown.
It sloughs off in flakes,
leaving letters or the occasional
ill-suited, illegible word
trailing behind me.

I pick at adverbs and articles
hanging from my fingertips;
This morning I pulled a whole phrase
off my arm like a sunburn.

My language, once alight,
now settles like cinders
        on the ground,
        around the shower drain,
        upon my sheets;
My language no longer serves me.

Peel my vocabulary off my back,
tear my diction from my shoulders,
and my syntax from my chest;
Scratch the punctuation off my face—
my lips are chapped with parentheses.

Tomorrow I will have shed my language—
Unbound from an ill-fitting lexicon—
coughed the alphabet from my lungs
and exhaled the last serif
like cigarette smoke
to find the world new,
uncontained and undefined.

Blind Man's Poem

Ethan Taylor

You are a blind man's poem.

I read your body in Braille,
the rhyming lines of your brow
swept down
toward the soft turn of your cheek
and your lips' closed couplet.

I trace your back like a riverbed,
the pebbles of your spine
washed smooth
by the soft waves that rush
through the valley of your shoulders.

I walk my fingertips across chill-bumps,
the lyrics of sighs on your chest,
kept silent
with the rhythm of breaths
held back against beating hearts.

I sweep my lips over planes,
the landscape of your limbs,
laid bare
beneath this blind man's gaze
and found no less beautiful by cecity.

A Dream Song

Lyndsay Hodgens

I found a turtle in my yard the other day, three days dead—
Still strung together, despite the ants.
Our golden boy squats, peering overhead.
The rain sometimes falls in needles, he said.
Despite the facts, despite deceptively clear skies
I'll crouch here with him if given the chance.

I'll stay until He comes—
Beast, or savior, or woman.
--Are you an upstanding man, sir?
Man upstanding, I'm not.
--Did you bring the creature out of the rain?
I should have killed you a long time ago.

I have my mother's hands, or she has mine—
I have the same cavity-filled teeth, with caps.
Visit the grave of my childhood,
Pray to the picket fence, I will.
That place is haunted by boys with bare feet
Who laugh hungrily as the cars speed by.

Untitled

Jennifer Gabriel

Mangling skin I would have seen him, too.
Letha would have hated that.
I missed her teeth, eyes, bones.
As a little child I understood
Going away; as never come through
Who could be more reliable, serious, than that?

Burnt asphalt left trails
Torn denim, yellow sweating

And then stained his thin white collar
Like this I'm straining my eyes. One proof.
Who would show me the truth? Wails.
Is there any life in this town, tempting, tempting.
A cat, a squirrel, fur flying.
Dead, says the cat
Joyous in the ceremony of warm-blooded prey
Between the leaves, death sirens sigh.
The cat licks her lips, crying
Caterwauls begging for warm old friendly hands' pat.

Untitled

Breona Jackson

There stood twice, twice-A man
That was a Boy
john skugnk de seed of De country... South
Bare as the old Lady's snare
Rigid-Dark, and crooked
Over, over, by that river stood once.

Battered with disappointments, non skipped-random
john smelled of rolled cardboard
from de city money-coins
Trumans' moon, stars and planets never released
Poor young-old John s.
sat by the puddle-reflections rippled

this last motion reapproved itself
Up yes up he couldn't
revise —NO
Time to think Grandfather counts no numbers once
Redundant sound, self adrenaline cloud
Twice he stood now.

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Untitled

TiLyn Butler

Presently, in the toilet bowl, in this drain
Didn't know where to go so I followed my nose
Swimming, at a rapid pace in the opposite direction of this shit water.
Every mermaid needs a pet fish
Time doesn't stay in a bottle when time means pain
You are hidden, they are exposed

Yet to find energy to interact with them
Always painting and fighting over the same bone
Count the bruises left by the hand in the dark.
Smiley timidly-timely, it's true I usually get my way
My song to the sky, singing I swam
You are mobile, they are slow.

Cigarettes and tea that's all that is left
Lost all my thoughts so I painted my toes
Someone turn the light on
There was a girl here too, wearing a purple dress
She said, "Come to my house," with strawberry breath
I'm still here but they're all gone.

Ayahuasca

Evan Patton

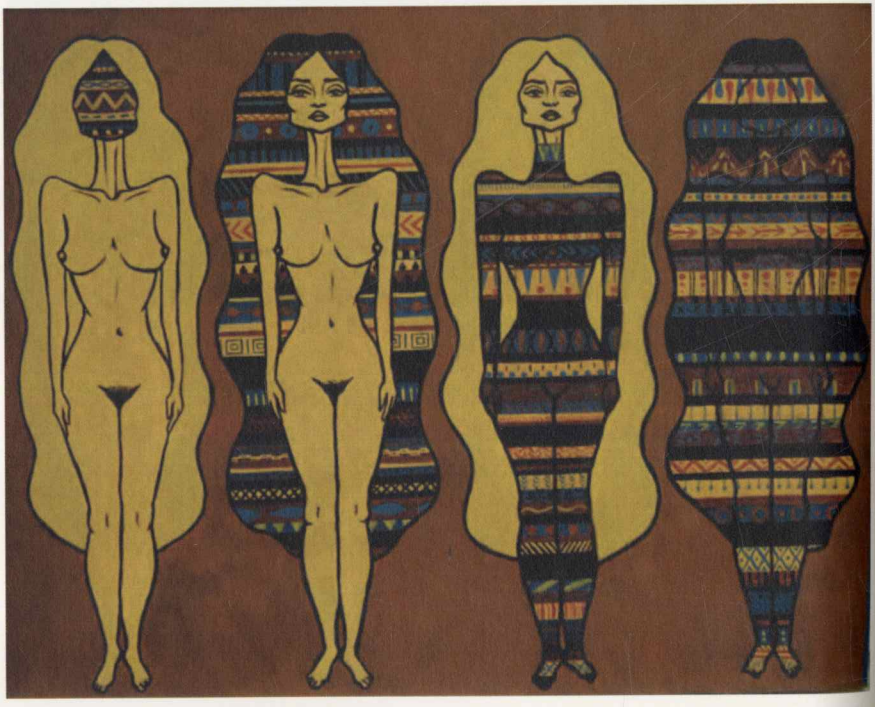
isolated forests of black hair
vine up the bareness of ankles,
what was once dry, smooth, and
odorless now holds the dampness
of dewy romps.
feathery soot ascends,
pushing through porous grafts
of seeded holes,
veining the tender insides
of pallid thighs,
dissecting the crags
of raw testicles- hard
with rigidly bonded aerial roots,
beckoning a wiry coarseness of age
blackened and curled with reason.
Brows of the best men
score temples with
iridescent offering of self-reflection.
And as the vined forest grows
atop the head of one man,
so its tendrils coil
the ankles of another.
And so free the ankles
of the previous victim,
fogged with grey-
from the soil of black vine
-whitening as a ghost
in measurable time.

Evan Patton
"Ayahuasca"
mixed media

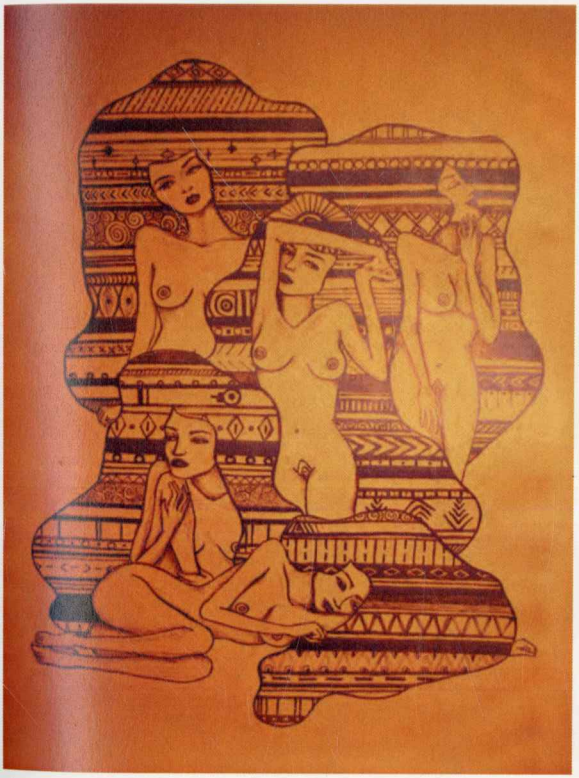
"Generations", *Lithograph*

Hannah Adamson

"Beauty Routine", *oil painting*

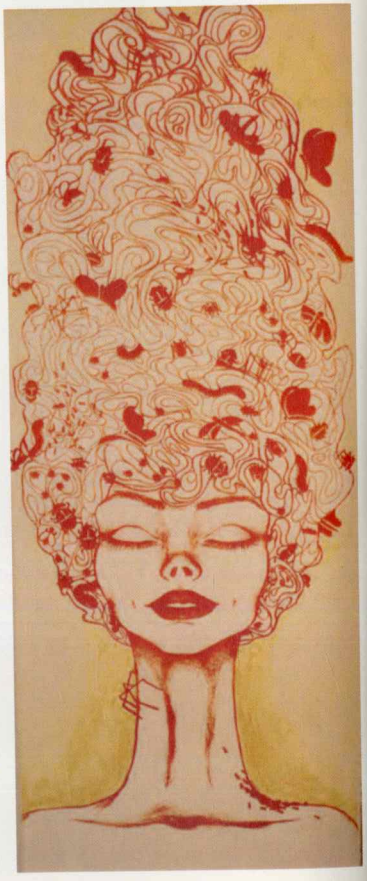


"Headdress"
Lithograph

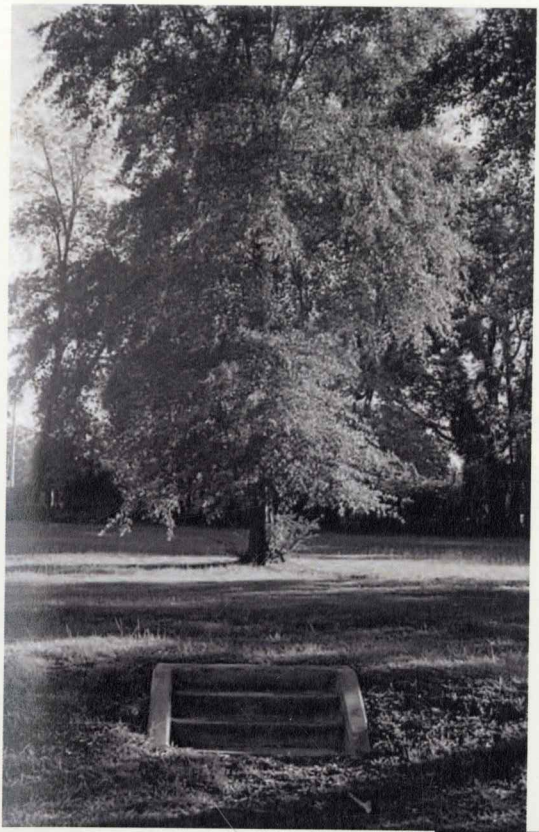


"Intricasies"
Lithograph

Zach Gallman
"Hold On"
iron

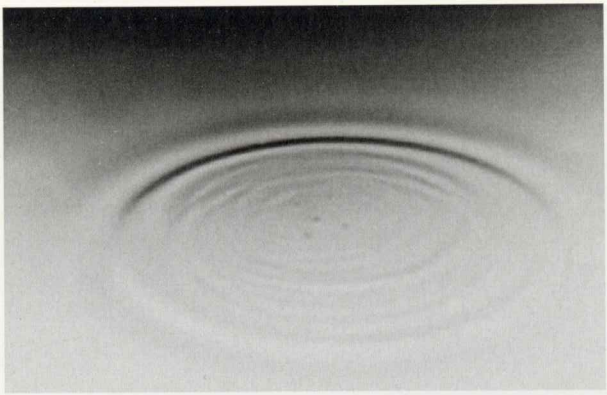


Hannah Adamson
"Tingle"
Lithograph



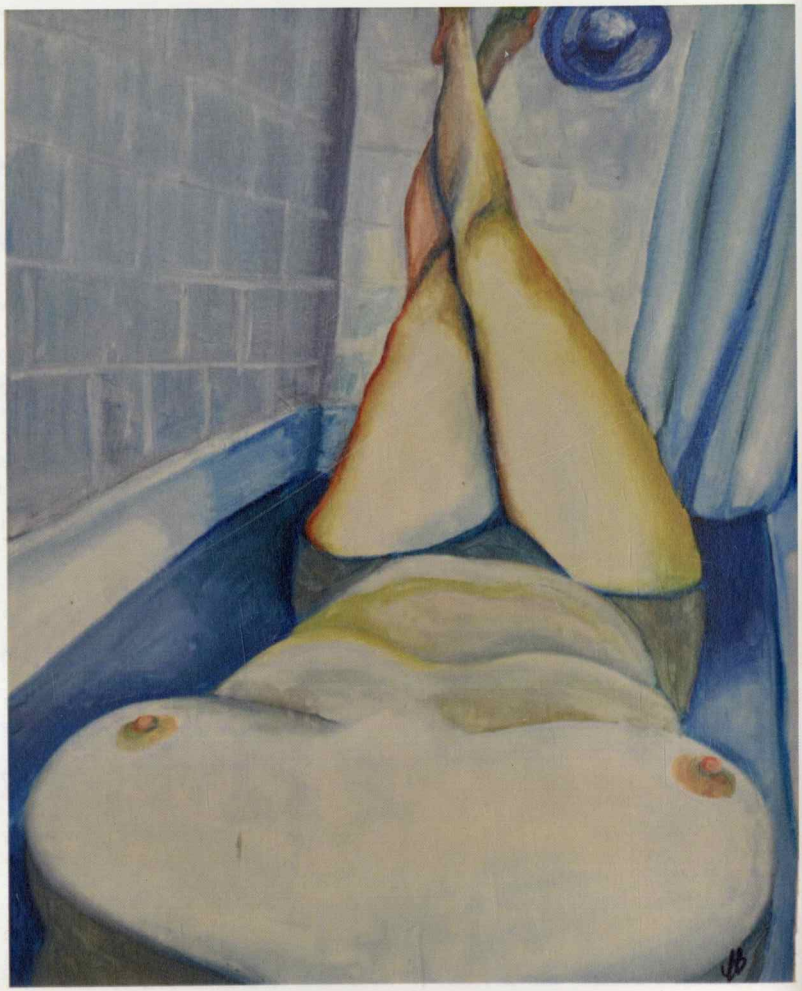
Hannah Barrett
"Home"
photography

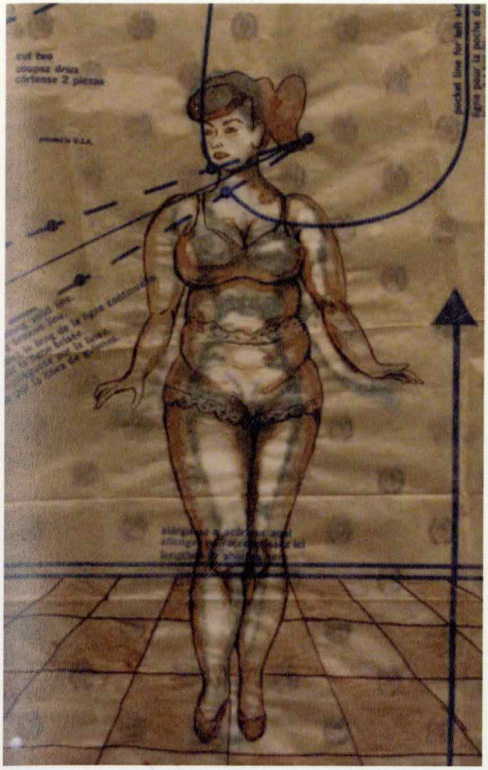
Hannah Barrett
"Untitled"
photography



Hannah Barrett
"Zen"
charcoal

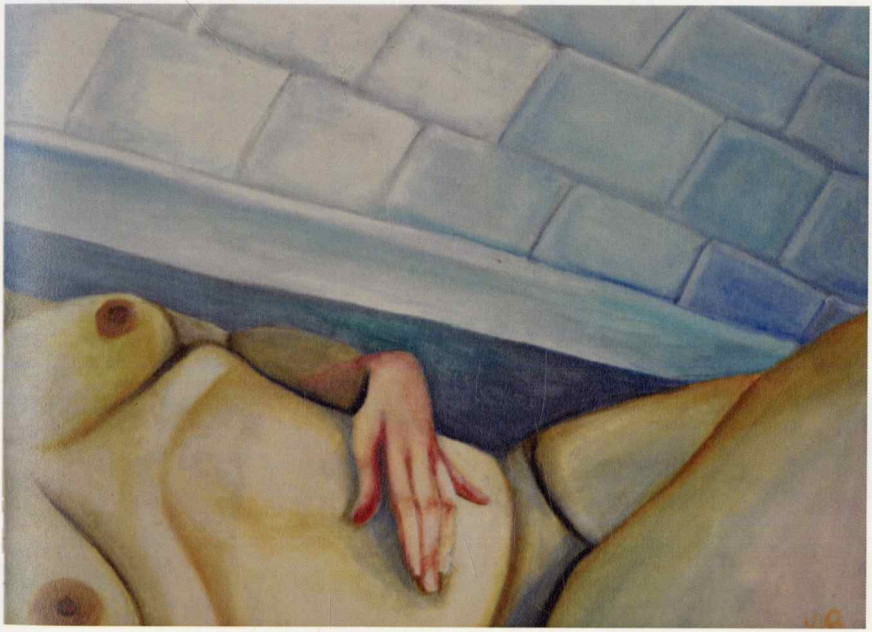
Lindsay Bennett "Lady in Bath #1" *oil*





Rachel Hall
"#2"
(detail from "Alterations" Series)
mixed media

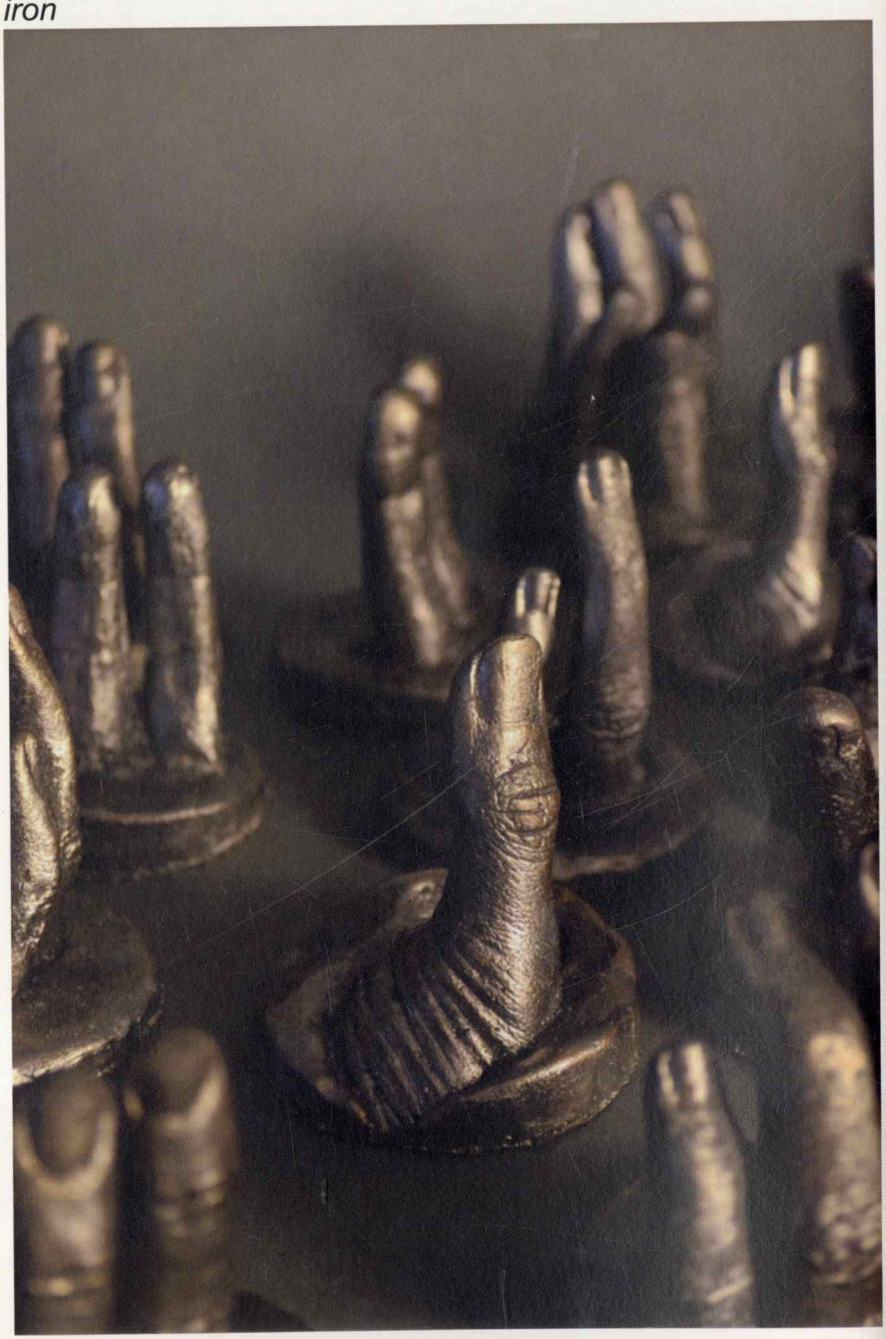
Lindsay Bennett "Lady in Bath #2" *oil*



Rachel Hall

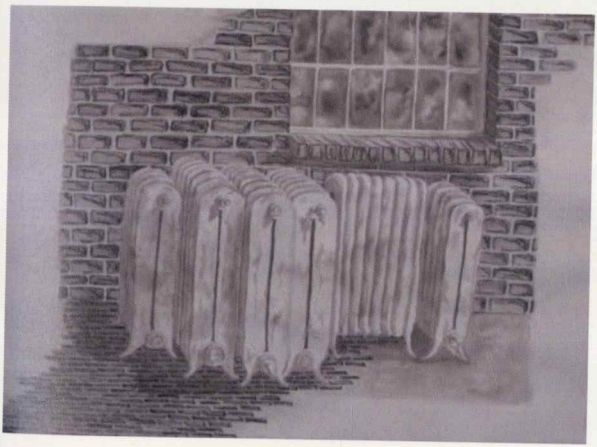
"fingers"

iron



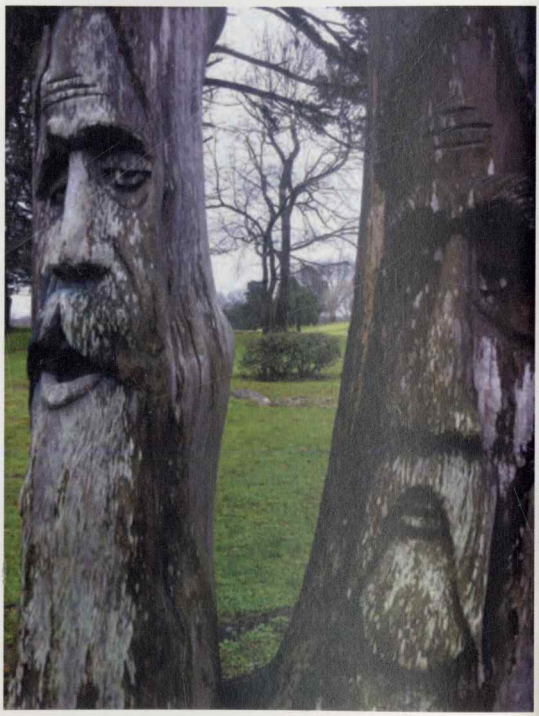
"Mutation"
acrylic

"Untitled"
iron



"Invasion"
Charcoal/ india ink

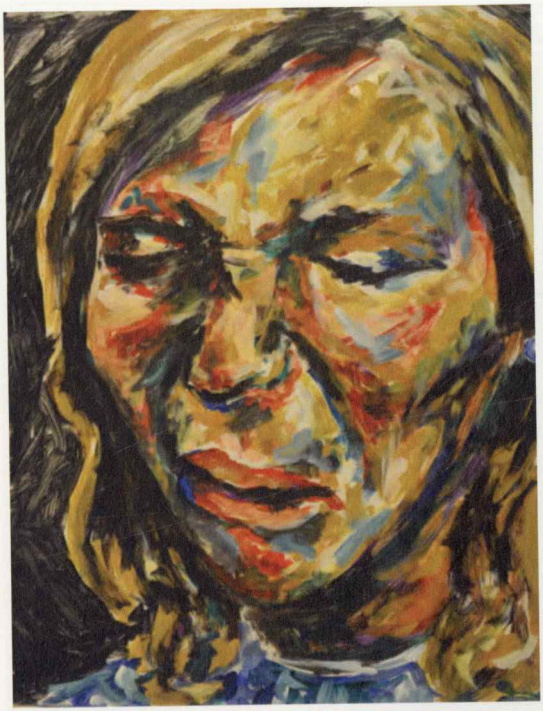
Marley Wray
"A Russian
Winter"
acrylic



Elizabeth
Simonton
"untitled"
photograph

Rachel Hamrick "Robert" *acylic*

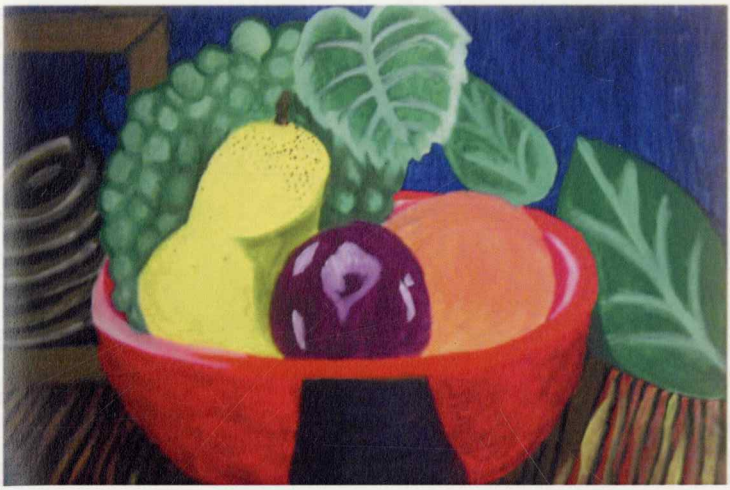
Rachel Hamrick "Dementia" *acylic, fabric*



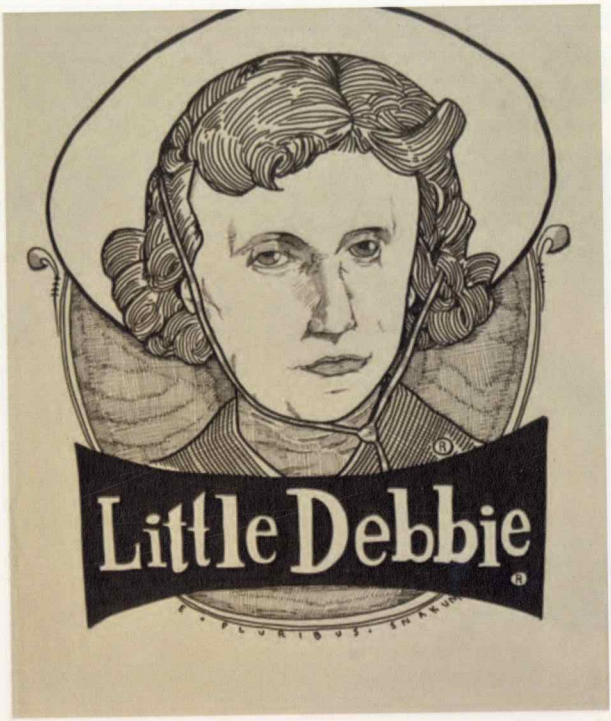
Rachel Hamrick
"Dementia"
acylic, fabric

Jessica Harrington "Razor Hornets" *charcoal*

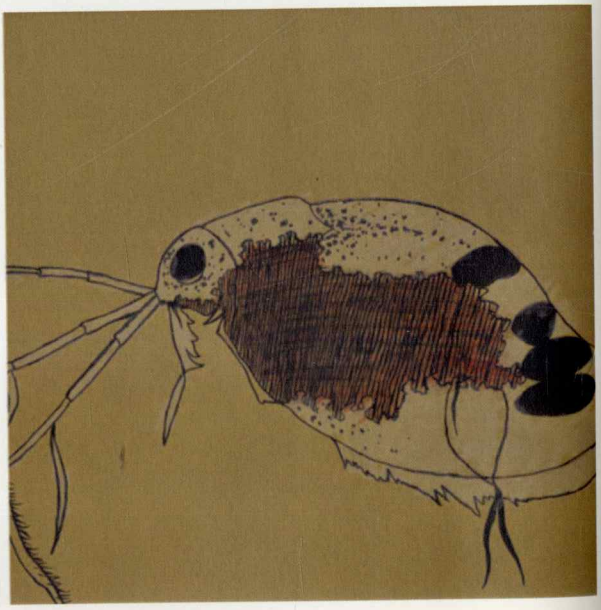
Telysa Harris "Fruit Bowl"



Morgan MacDonald "untitled" *pastels*



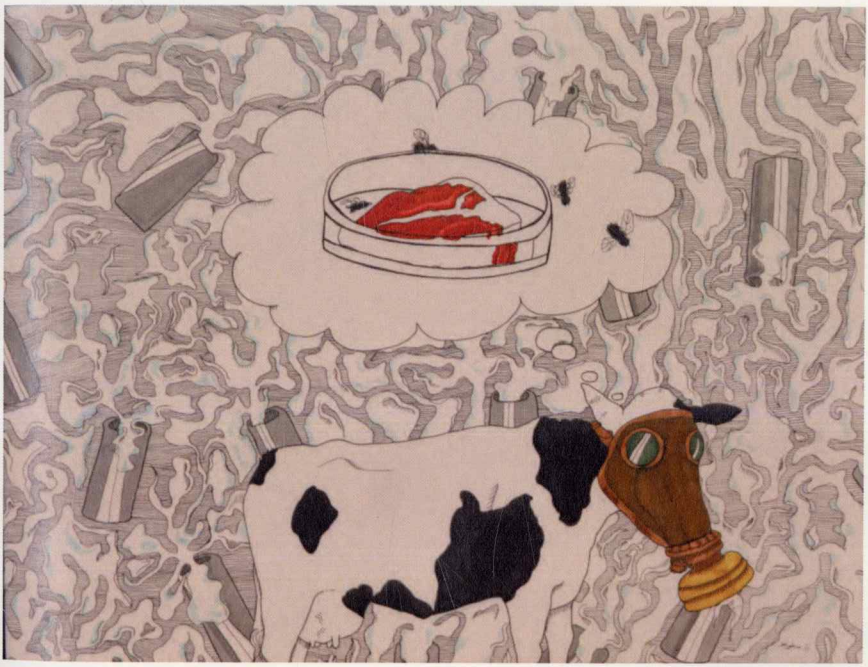
Madison Howard
"E Pluribus Snackum"
pen



Madison Howard
"Water Flea"
Crayon, Ink

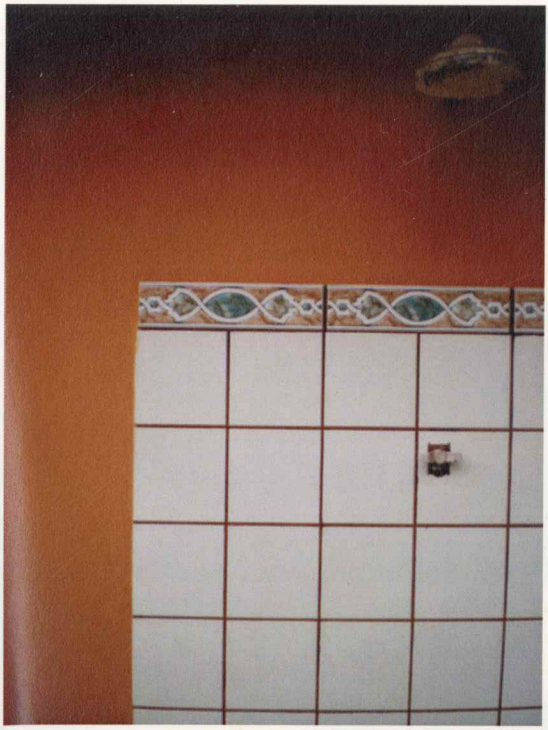
Lindsey Jett
"White House Still Life"
intaglio

"Lab meat" *pen, marker*



Lindsey Jett
"fART"
screenprint

"fiddler in the kitchen"
woodcut



Jill Kleist
"tiled brazil"
screenprint

"The Fuzzy Friend" *photo*

"forgotten tea party"
photograph

Devon Lunsford

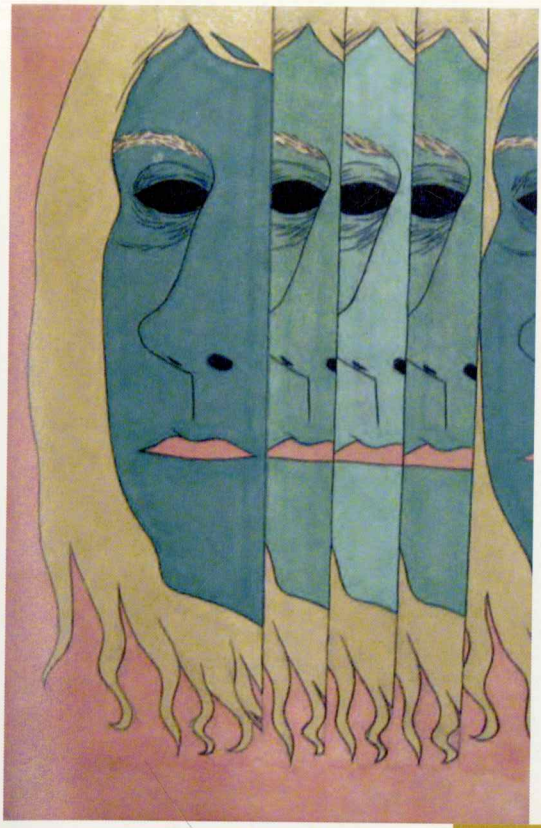
"Munro Leaf"
photograph

Devon Lunsford
"Salem"
photograph

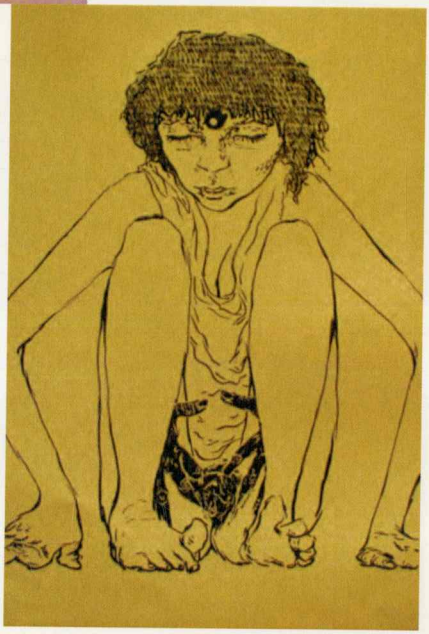
Ann Muddy
"Banana Boat"
ethching, aquatint
on copper

Ryan Moriarty
"Untitled"
Photo

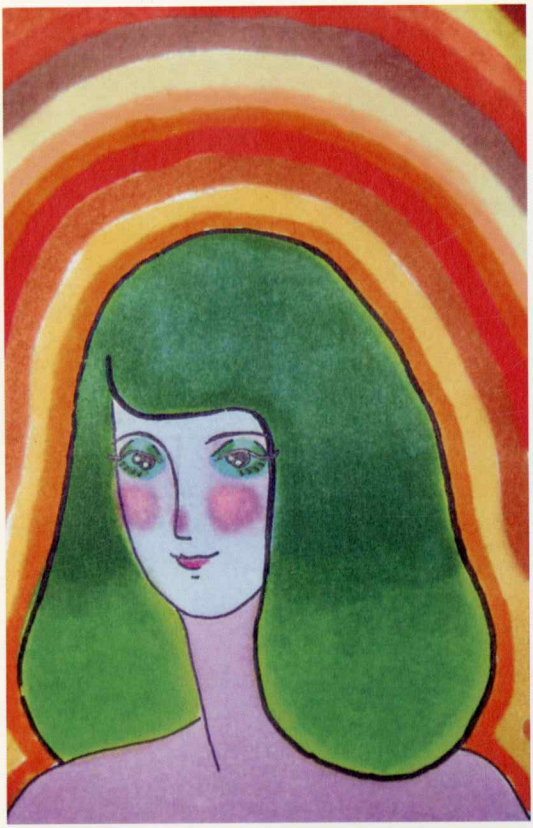
Ann Muddy
"Ambient Blur"
digital



Ann Muddy
"Fract"
color woodcut



Ann Muddy
"Past, Present,
and future tense"
lithograph



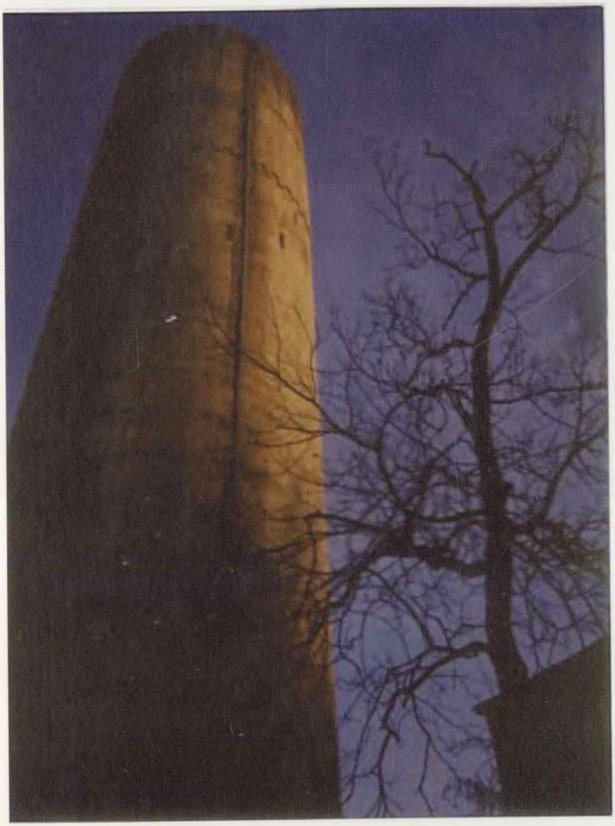
Ann Muddy
"Seventy"
chartpacks, pen

"Therapy"
acrylic

Rebecca Munkachy
"#2"
intaglio

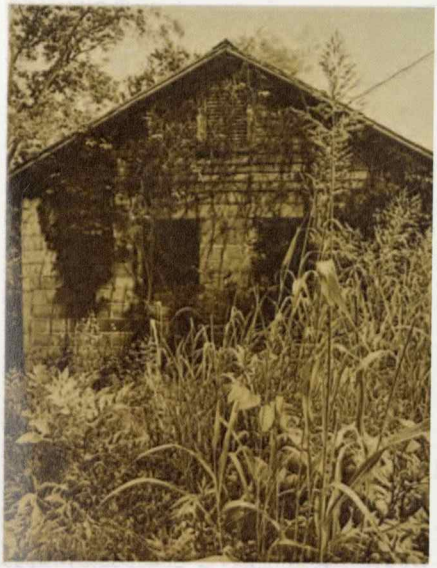
C.W Newell
"For Lorn"
photo

C.W Newell "stream", *photo*



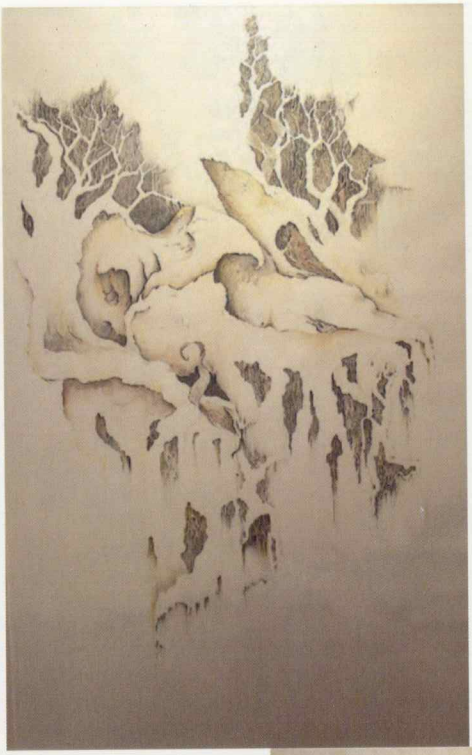
Laura Quattrochi
"Untitled"
photo

Jesse Robataille
"Untitled"
photo

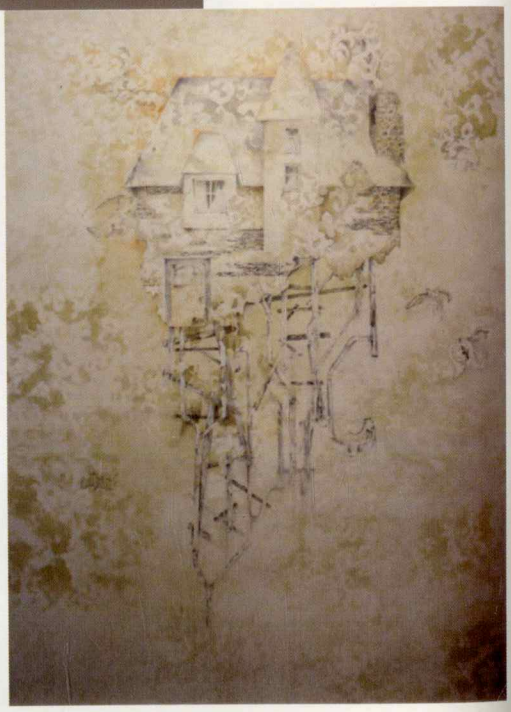


Jesse Robataille
"Untitled"
photo

Laura Quattrochi "Untitled", *photo*



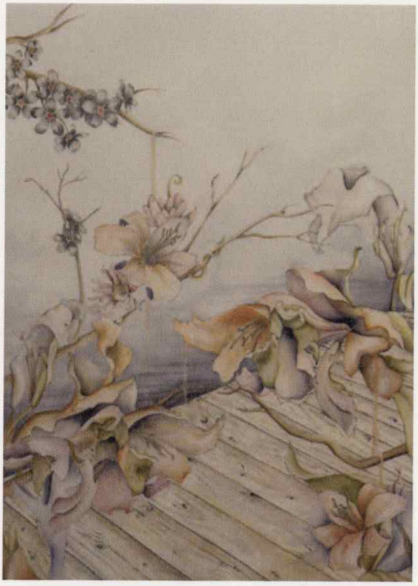
Danielle Robinson
"Futility of Pleasure"
watercolor/graphite



Danielle Robinson
"Vanitas House"
watercolor/graphite

Danielle Robinson
"Fragile Existence"
(detail from triptych)
watercolor/graphite

Danielle Robinson
"Nature of Vanity"
(detail from triptych)
watercolor/graphite



"Transient Beauty" (detail from triptych)
watercolor/graphite

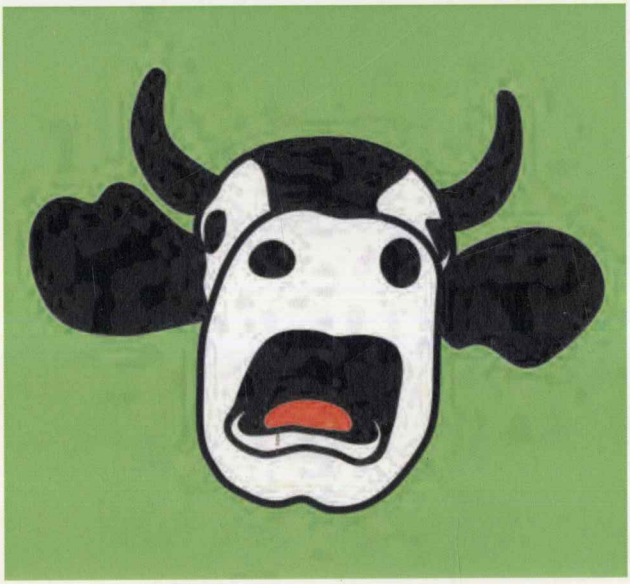
Travis Swinford
"Untitled"
digital photo

Logan Tanner
"Walk the Plank"
digital

Logan Tanner
"Octoad"
digital

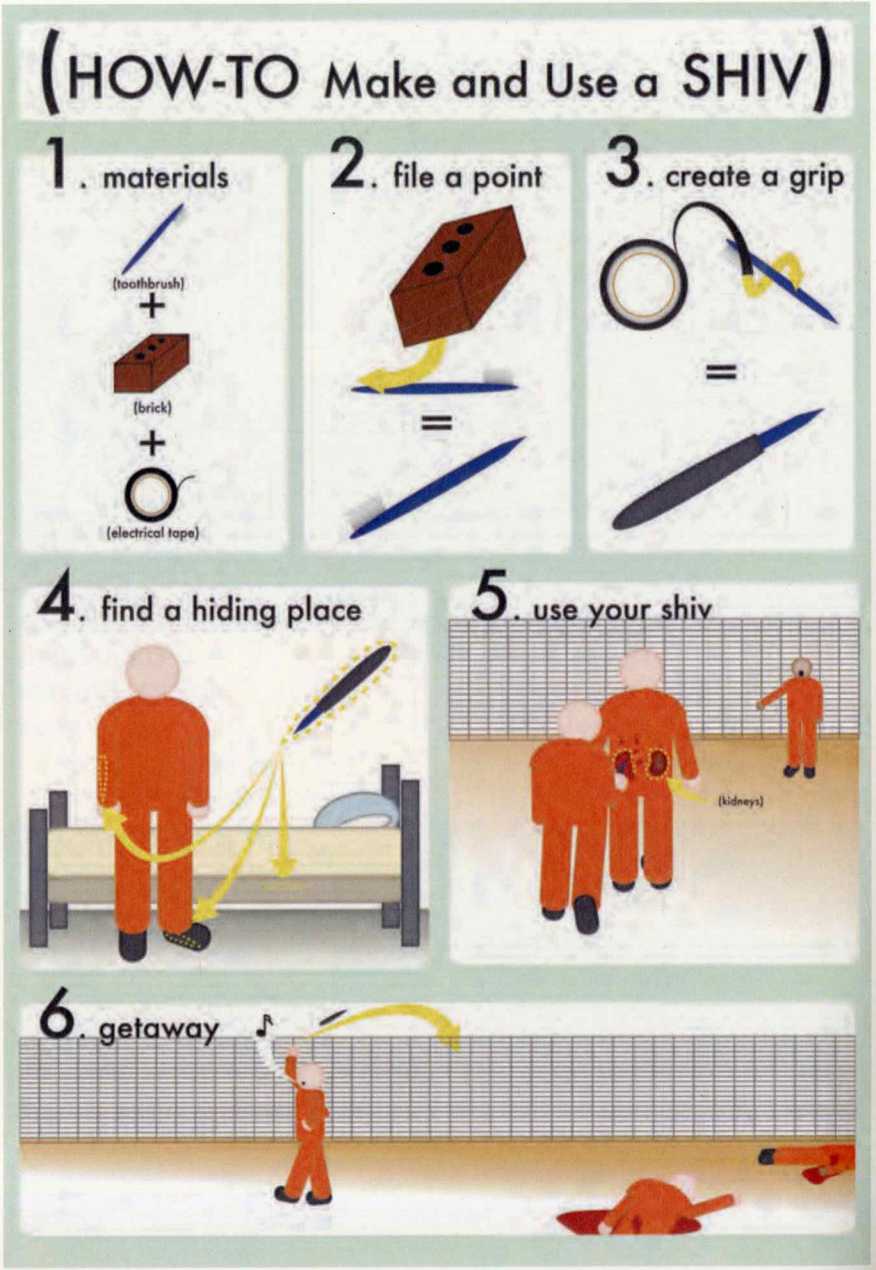
Ellen Sowa
"Dancing Squirrels Logo"
digital

Ellen Sowa
"Distressed Cow Logo"
digital



Ethan Taylor
"Morning Prayers"
photo

Ethan Taylor
"Noise In The Dark"
photo

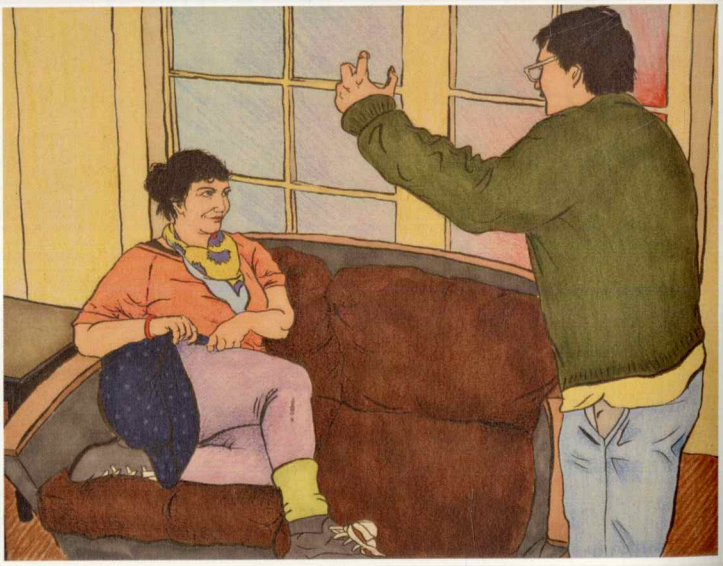


Ellen Sowa
"How-to Make and Use a Shiv"
digital

Travis Swinford
"Finished Where"
mixed media

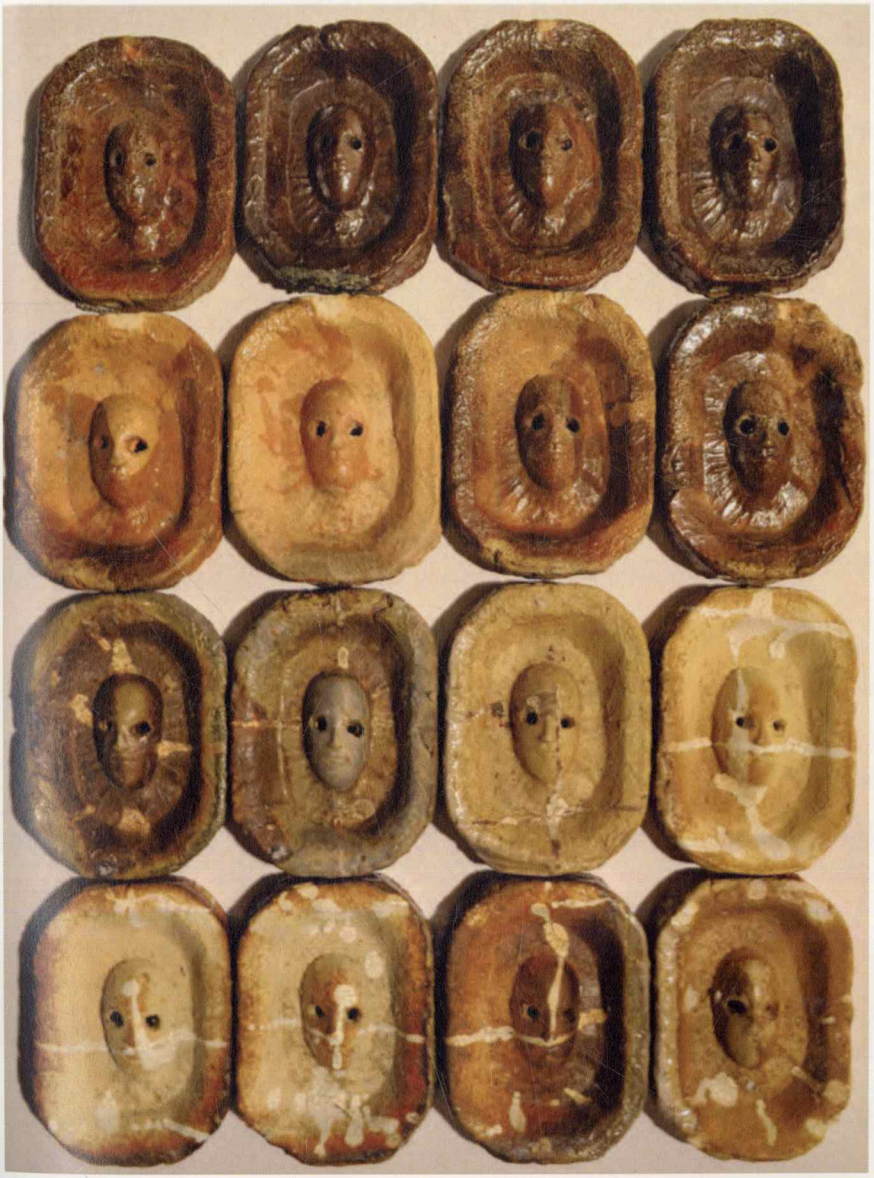
Travis Swinford
"Cocktail Evening"
"photo"

Travis Swinford
"House on the World"
mixed media



Carl Sanders
"Before the
... Murdering"
mixed media

Ellen Sowa
"Anonymous Faces"
ceramics



Nine Hundred Ninety-Nine

Melanie Berry

Darkness. It was dark. Dim voices shouted frantically over his head, through the wrong end of a megaphone. They were so far away as they continued yammering, shouting in a language that he might have known once, so long ago....

He was running, breathing hard. He must have been running, running without stopping, for miles and miles and miles. His lungs were smoldering, lit on fire when he inhaled. He smelled the acid, metallic, bitter scent of blood. His feet must be bleeding. He was running so hard, Stop! Stop breathing, stop to rest-

"Look at me! C'mon, babe, just look at me!" One of the voices rose out of the din above the others. Look at whom? He couldn't, he couldn't see in the darkness, it was so dark –

He was moving; he must be running again. The voice that had called fell silent, drifted away. His lungs hurt. Stop it, stop running....

Different voices, same inflection, same yammering, same frantic shouting. His side ached. It was the running, he had to stop –

Cold. Icy ends of fingertips probing his side, bending his neck, opening his mouth, trying to pry open his eyes.

It was so dark –

A prick in his arm. Something hot ran up it, into him, through him. He didn't like it. He tried to get it off, get it out, but he couldn't move.

The voices, louder. The dark more complete.

Another prick in his opposite arm. This was cold, it made him shiver. The cold stretched icy fingers up his spine to his neck, froze it; sent trickles of it down his spine, encased him in ice. The hot made him angry, The Cold made him afraid. It seeped into his bones, froze him, stilled his heart.

The hands manipulated his head again, tilted it backwards, his throat fully exposed, held him there. A voice accompanied the hands; vibrating, still urgent, still so far away. A second pair of hands hinged his jaws. Then, before he could fight, The Cold seized him, held him, possessed him utterly.

Darkness again.

He was alone, drifting somewhere without control. The Cold still seized his chest, but his lungs no longer burned; they froze. He felt nothing – and was almost more terrified of than then of The Cold –

Wait.

Hands. A new pair of hands. Where they touched, they left liquid trickles of warmth: about his face, his throat, his own hands. He knew these new hands – he knew he had felt them before. He knew they were the hands of someone he knew very well; someone he cared for.

But he could not remember whom.

A voice as well accompanied the hands, the same voice that had called earlier, perhaps. He didn't know. The Voice was a smooth, clear note that rippled through him and made him want to respond; but the cold stopped him. So he listened for the rise and fall of it; and ached because of it, although he didn't know why.

Then it was gone; the hands were gone, and The Voice was gone, replaced by other voices that droned like bees. He wanted to scream for the first voice to come back, to stay; stay until he remembered, stay until The Cold released him – but he couldn't scream, or even whisper. He was left alone again in a dark ocean, with The Cold snaking down his throat and clutching at his lungs.

It seemed that he had always existed in the dark. He had existed there since time began. Voices came and went, but never the one he longed to hear again. The Cold also settled into him, became a part of him. And hands came and went as well but they were never warm, and never the ones that had struck such an odd chord so deep in him.

A voice again, and it was no different: shaky, monotone; then it faded.

Wait. The Voice again. It was back. If The Cold had let him he would have sprung up, run to the Voice, melted into it and tried to remember. Then the Voice left but the hands returned, on his face, stroking so that the change from nothingness to sensation caused his skin to throb almost painfully.

There was a chest against his own, breathing that tickled his neck, and the hands on his face. He wanted so badly to open his eyes, to see; but it was impossible, he was held back by The Cold. And yet, the heart that echoed his own fended some of The Cold off so he could try to remember, and he strained to, running again –

– Numbers. Numbers to 1000. Why escaped him, but he had to keep counting. Had to. Had to. What started numbers? How did it go? What was first...?

The Voice returned in his ear, murmuring something beyond comprehension. Somehow it was beautiful, somehow it made him remember.

One. One. One. What next, what next?

The Voice in the background, shaking him – you know! Remember! You know this!

Two. And then, and then...

The Voice was gone. He lurched backwards into oblivion, but first remembered, remembered!

Three.

Four.

Five.

The Cold wrenched through him; but he was at peace. He was remembering.

Six. Seven. Eight....

He became obsessed with the numbers. Sometimes the memory of them came easily, other times he had to fight The Cold for it until, exhausted, he would remember enough to go on.

Voices. Numbers. Numbers. Numbers....

A car. No, a truck. There had been a truck in the wrong lane, a red truck, and the headlights far too bright, his foot slammed the brake, somebody screamed –

Forty-four. Forty-five.

Irene. But what did that mean?

Forty-six. Forty-seven.

He dug backwards for answers, but could come up with nothing beyond a pulsing, red-hot pain, accompanied by a chilly lethargy and a dull ache, the pungent twang of something smoldering in the air. But then it was voices again; a broken record, the beginning of the tape again.

Seventy-eight. Seventy-nine. Eighty.

He remembered being held, cradled so it was soothing, soft hair against his cheek, a hand grasping his own tightly–

Ninety-five. Ninety-six. What came next?

Ninety-seven. An ambulance. Ninety-eight. Eyes. Dark, panicked eyes, the waves of pain hitting him and breaking; colors: surrounded by white splattered with red, and those dark, dark eyes –

His head swam. He gasped for air, wrestled against the terrible, clenching Cold for breath, for air. He would run until he died of exhaustion, he wanted to breathe, wanted answers.

One hundred two. One hundred three. One hundred four.

Irene. Irene. Irene. Somehow the name was connected to a soul, what soul he had no idea. The Cold held that answer. And no matter how hard he tried, he could never grasp it.

Two hundred thirty-eight, two hundred thirty-nine, two hundred forty.

Hands on his neck, along his chest, along his side-

A convulsion of pain shook him limply.

Two hundred ninety-nine, three hundred.

Count. Count. Count!

A prick in his arm. Something hot again, running along his limbs like live wires. But the sensation didn't bother him as badly. Anything was better than The Cold.

Who was Irene?

Three hundred thirty-four, three hundred thirty-five....

The Cold seized him by the neck, began to drag him downward, back to oblivion, numbers, and no answers. He fought, fought as hard as he could, but it still beat him down.

Four hundred one, four hundred two...

He struggled, and gave up; focused only on the numbers.

Four hundred twenty. Four hundred twenty-one, four twenty-two....

Five hundred.

Six hundred.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine hundred....

"Any sign of change?"

The doctor tried to study the young woman facing him with cool professionalism, but one look at her hectic eyes and drawn face and he dissolved into pity.

"Not yet, I'm afraid," he told her gently. "He's still on ventilation."

The woman bit her lip savagely. "But he's not brain-dead?" When he didn't answer, she said, "then he still has a chance." She talked carefully, tasting the words before she said them, staring at him hollowly. "I told him to count in the ambulance," she took a couple of strangely heavy steps and walked alongside him. "I told him to count in the ambulance, to one-thousand, to keep him awake. He's a fighter. He'll finish."

The doctor nodded almost stupidly.

"You know, this is funny," she laughed, with a razor edge to it, painfully twisting the still-heavy rings on her finger, "He's a cop, and I've always had nightmares he'd die in a shootout." She laughed again, but it sounded more like a sob. "How ironic! How ironic."

"You can go in," the doctor stopped in front of a door, unwilling to listen to her any longer.

She slipped in without a sound, started to talk to the man who would probably die. "Hey, babe. How're you feeling? I'm going to keep counting, okay? Just – just for something to say right now. Alright? Where were we? I think we had hit eighty. We'll start there. Eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three..."

The doctor turned and strode back down the hall

Her voice still seemed to ring in his ears anyway.

"...Eighty-eight, eighty-nine, ninety."

Tall Mountain, Deep Hole

Hannah Conner

We couldn't see the hole, but we could smell the brown leaves down there. They were rotting in some stagnant remnants of a summer thunderstorm. "Maybe there's a spring under there," Uncle Ronny said with his cigarette flopping up and down in his lips.

I was four years old then, standing at the top of Green Mountain with all the able-bodied men of my family. It was Thanksgiving day, the year all the women had sons and none of them did the ritual after-lunch hike.

The birth of my little brother had been an immense betrayal; since then I had attached myself to my dad because of the new awareness of what Mama was capable of. Even though I was scared of Uncle Ronny and Pawpaw Green would hook his cane around my neck whenever I walked close enough, I chose to go up the mountain with them because Daddy was going.

In their flannel and their blue jeans, the men stood around the lip of earth and speculated about how the hole got there.

"Might be some kind of shelter," I heard Uncle Joey say from across the hole.

As all of his grandsons spoke, Pawpaw Green looked from voice to identical voice, his hands in the pockets of his dark denim overalls and his spindly cane hanging on the crook of his elbow. He always had an absent smile on his lips as he worked his naked gums against one another. Did he ever talk? Even then I didn't know what his voice sounded like, and I stood puzzling over how an eighty year-old man who walked with a cane could climb a mountain. I'd seen him do it and I still didn't get it. He looked at his own son, my Pawpaw Reggie, who vaguely agreed with Uncle Joey. "Bear cave, maybe."

I took a step back and curled my arm around a knee of my dad's camouflage cargoes. He stretched his fingers apart in front of my face to let me know I could hold his hand if I wanted to, but I didn't. Then he might have known I was scared. Thinking that there was a son threatening to take my place, I once again took my position at the edge of the pit and watched as clumps of dirt on the edge, inches from my feet, crumbled and fell into the darkness.

Daddy wasn't concerned with vulnerabilities—he reached down and gripped my putty hand in his dry, calloused fingers. I gazed at his fingernails, bitten to the quick, and thought of the banjo he picked. Anything with strings, he could play it: guitar, dulcimer, mandolin. I thought of Mama complaining that she couldn't play an instrument while she made me doll clothes at the sewing machine, and me struggling to just hold a pencil—our hierarchy of hands.

Kevin, the youngest of the grandsons, broke the silence. "Maybe an earthquake did it."

All the men laughed then. There were no earthquakes in Alabama. Johnny said, "Or aliens."

My dad—in the philosopher voice that I was familiar with, even then—said, "You know, Johnny does bring up a good point. The very mystery of this hole could be proof, by the condition of its mere there-ness, that if we believe the earth exists because of a Divine Being, and I know we all do, then why couldn't we believe that a hole in that aforementioned earth was made by some sort of otherworldly being?"

Pawpaw Reggie, not quite used to his son-in-law, threw a small rock in the hole. The men were embarrassed for my dad and so feigned a deep interest in listening for the rock to hit the water. Daddy winked at me. Ronny stepped on a twig. All the men shushed him, but we'd already missed the small splash we'd been anticipating. He rolled his eyes and walked over to pick up a bigger rock—this one the size of a grown man's fist—that was resting near my left shoe. He threw it at an angle so that it hit the dirt wall of the pit, whispering echoes off the soft and fertile dirt until the splash at the bottom a few seconds later.

It might have been his proximity to me that made Uncle Ronny do what he did, but I'm more inclined to think the idea stemmed from decades of tormenting little girls. First my mama, who was his little sister, then his own daughter had been subject to

his harrassment for as long as they could remember. He grabbed me by my shoulders, suggesting that most likely it was a hole to throw unwanted little girls into; he simultaneously feigned shoving me in. While he never let go of my shoulders, my legs still crumpled beneath me as I saw the darkness of the pit loom suddenly closer to my face. A quiet noise, strangled and injured, came from my throat. In that same movement Daddy pulled me up off the ground by the hand that was still held tightly in his fingers, pressing my cheek into the roughness of his green thermal-covered shoulder. He scolded Uncle Ronny, who was still laughing in that abrasive way that he had.

Softly, in the same tone he used to console our wining dog, Daddy said a drown-out, "Babe" and turned his bottom lip down. Suspecting I was close to tears, he began to whisper something comforting to me, but was distracted by Pawpaw Reggie, who had begun explaining in a suddenly serious voice that he had just realized the pit was probably a sinkhole.

He had worked his whole life in quarries and mines, had seen a whole bull-dozer sink into the earth with no warning, so he and his sons were wary of these things. They all began moving away from the opening. Pawpaw Green seemed unwilling to put pressure on his cane as he walked on his wobbly legs. Sinkholes could always get bigger and they weren't particular about what went into them.

Even though Daddy had also heeded my granddad's warnings, I didn't believe that the earth would open up and take just anybody into it. I said as much, struggling to get loose, but he wouldn't let go. "There are caves deep in the ground that the dirt just sometimes falls into, sweety." The opening of the hole appeared smaller and smaller as he took big, careful steps away from it.

"Would it take mama?" I looked into his face, but continued my squirming.

"Yeah," he said. "Anybody."

I stopped fighting against him and craned my neck to see the hole once more. I wanted suddenly to be in the arms of Mama, in whose presence things like sinkholes didn't exist. She kept all dangers at bay, somehow.

Resting in his arms, I watched how the distance made the

ground seem to close upon itself as the hole blended in with the surface of the ground. With a feeling that I wouldn't be able to put a name to until much later—sublimity—I wondered what it must have been like when the first sinkhole opened up in a great yawn, the earth swallowing itself whole.

Mr. Brightside

Jayce Cosper

I return to my apartment after thirty minutes in a stranger's minivan (well, actually it's his mother's). Like a recent widow, I sit in my car for about fifteen minutes, reluctant to go in, knowing I'd be alone for the rest of the night. This is the third time this month I'd had relations with strange guys. My binge started with an email from my ex, Tanner, basically telling me that this whole long distance thing just wasn't working out and he still loved me and I kind of zoned out so I could delete him from my Facebook and burn all his personal items I had in my possession.

Tanner was my only real relationship. We'd dated for a year and I kind of nearly loved him, or at least grown used to him. He was polite and smart and cuter than me. He had a twisted sense of humor, like me, and verged into cornball territory often, like me. He was named after the family on Full House and, when drunk enough, would do Stephanie Tanner impressions. An attractive 22-year-old saying "How Rude!" just got me all hot and bothered. We stayed in a lot, mostly at my behest. He'd ask if I wanted to go to The Inferno. I never wanted to go to the Inferno. I'd lost my childhood love of the dance, wanting so badly to be center stage but unwilling to compete with vapid, model-like boys for the spotlight. Tanner would agree that a movie and cuddling was just as fun, but I'd see the look of disappointment on his face, the same look Mom had when I came home with a "B" on my report card.

I'd miss Tanner. He was the most sincere guy I'd ever met. Every other boy I was attracted to seemed so shallow and concerned with looks. They were also pretty dumb. Sure, I had a subculture that I'd never dreamed of when I was a teen. But everyone in this subculture sucked beyond belief.

I started having sex with anyone who "winked" at me online. I went into my cave of bitterness and self-destruction, and anyone brave enough to come near was stepping near a land mine.

Once I finally enter my apartment, the alarm clock is blaring. I'd set it just in case Frankie, my anonymous sexual partner, decided to murder me. I throw my phone on a table. It had been on silent. I have three missed calls, all from Courtney Templeton. I don't want to deal with her tonight. It's nearing 1 am.

I wiggle the mouse on my computer and the screen pops up. Frankie's sex hunting website profile is still on the screen,

along with my last instant message to him: "Be there soon, stud!"

I need a shower.

I maximize my essay-in-waiting at the bottom of the screen. I stare intently at the computer, its rays piercing my eyes before I become distracted by the mess surrounding my computer and on my floor. I wish I had the money for a housekeeper. I wish I had money. Jeans and aprons and shirts and socks litter the floor, enveloping my various school work. Half-written term papers waiting to be finished: Woolf, Bowen, Conrad, and Joyce talk in hushed whispers on my floor, waiting for me to write on them, to give them meaning.

I can't deal with Modernism tonight so I check my Facebook. My brother Daniel sent me a message earlier in the evening telling me Dad's condition: not looking good. Dad wouldn't even want me there. Daniel is better at this sort of thing than me. I'm sure I wouldn't have the right things to say.

A few months back, when there was a Tanner and me, I'd taken him to see Dad, after initial misgivings. I introduced Tanner as my "friend" as Dad squeezed Mom's hand, the monitor accelerating like it does in the soap operas when someone is freaking out in the hospital.

"Goddamnit," was all Dad mumbled. I was uncertain whether he was cursing me or the monitor. The nurse rushed in, not knowing that the cure lay in my closetedness. Dad hadn't bought the friend lie. I kind of looked at him for a few minutes, waiting for him to say something. He said nothing, just watched the nurse as she adjusted his medicine.

Daniel scolded me a few minutes later over coffee. "Dad can't handle this right now. He's dying. He doesn't need to deal with your drama."

"Drama?" I asked, looking over at Tanner, the same awkward expression on his face as when he'd first seen my father's blood pressure rise on the monitor. "This is my life. You brought Courtney here."

"You know it's different. Look, I accept you. On some level Mom accepts you. But Dad—"

"My dad was a military guy," Tanner interjected. "Always talking about what the 'faggots' were doing to our nation. He hated me for a good three years after I told him. Well, actually he caught me with Grant Stover from next door. He threw me across the room. I thought he was going to kill me. But now I talk to him nearly every week, even about Jack."

"Dad doesn't have three years. He may not even have three months," Daniel said, stirring his coffee. "Do you guys want to stick around and have dinner later? I'll call Court down and we can have

a double date."

"No, I'm good," I said, thinking of the time when I was nine, hiding in the pantry, listening to an after-church discussion between my parents. My mom had asked, "rhetorically," not realizing the subject of her inquiry was listening in, what if they had a gay son. She sure as hell wasn't talking about Daniel, who was already sneaking girls up to the attic at that point. Dad had raised his hand to his neck, like an umpire, indicating "Out!" He'd pointed toward the door, where my Mom's eyes lingered for a moment before going to the fridge to pull out some sweet tea. I stayed behind the sheet of our pantry for a solid hour, wondering how I might avoid being a gay son, and by extension, Dad's finger pointing to the door and Mom's averted glances.

"I thought you hated him," I said to Daniel, chewing on the end of a pen I'd stolen from the nurse earlier. "He always pushed you too hard and he was like a dictator."

"Well he pushed me right into law school, so maybe it wasn't so bad. Besides, he's dying, you know? We can't be selfish here."

"Your father deserves to know Jack's truth. Jack deserves to tell him," Tanner pleaded.

"Jack's had twenty years to tell him that truth. Time's run out and Dad doesn't want to hear it. He knows. He has to know. Let's just leave it at that."

"Whatever," I said, sipping my Coke before letting my attention go into reading the label on the can.

I look to my phone and see that Daniel has asked me if I am coming to visit Dad in the hospital, still dying after all these months. Daniel practically lives at the hospital with Dad, who is in the last stages of pancreatic cancer (just like Patrick Swayze!). I've been several times to the hospital, with Dad always almost dying every time. I don't have gas money or time to deal with what may turn out to be just another dress rehearsal. I text him back, "Probably tmrw afternoon. I'll bring Court."

Before I see that Daniel texts "okay," followed by an ominous ellipses, Courtney texts me: "WTF? where r u?"

me: "the apt. whats up?"

C: "ur supposed 2 come pick me up frm work, wtf. Ive been sitting here 4 like 2 hrs. And we're gna go 2 the Inferno 2nite."

me: "I hate the Inferno. It's infernal."

C: "U owe me! Get here NOW!"

me: "stop text-shouting. I'll be there shortly. Gotta change."

I grab some jeans from my floor that have probably been there for a month. Instead of showering, I sprinkle baby powder

down the front and back of my jeans and put on lots of deodorant. I check myself in the mirror, applying a little concealer to hide my dark circles. I pull back for a full view. If nothing else, my ass looks good and that's really all I need. I can't believe I'm going out. I have a paper to prognosticate and procrastinate about. Virginia Woolf waits for no man.

Courtney is my brother Daniel's fiancé. She and I both like boys, lip-synching to Top 40, and trashy reality shows. She's a slut. Daniel knows this on some level, perhaps even accepts it. Every time she cheats he wants to leave her. But a larger part of him wants to save her. He has a Jesus complex. .

I drive my busted Honda over to Waffle House. Courtney's already changed out of her uniform into a slut-tacular ensemble. She has made-up, raccoon eyes and wears a headband always. Her breasts are fighting for release in her purple halter top. They'll probably win by the night's end, depending on how many shots she takes.

Courtney gets in. "You're über late, Jack! I need to dance."

"Chill out. We're going to the Inferno. I'm sure you got some flirting done with Javier." Courtney punches my arm, giggles. Javier is her manager, and she's been trying to get with him forever but he's hopelessly Catholic and devoted to his family. "God, he should at least let you give him a hand job. That's not cheating."

"I have a boyfriend. Your brother," she reminds me.

"Oh, yeah. Did you let that guy you screwed last weekend about your relationship status?"

"It's on Facebook for anybody to see," Courtney says, adjusting her headband and checking that her fingernails have no chips or discolorations. "Have you talked to Daniel today? He texted me earlier and told me your Dad is in bad shape."

"Well, why aren't you there?" I snap at her in an accusing tone.

"Daniel says he knows I have finals and it's up to me. We can go tomorrow if you want. But tonight I'm getting my dance on, biatch," she says, applying a layer of gloss over her pink lipstick. She doesn't ask me why I'm not at the hospital and I feel a little bad for snapping on her.

"You're getting really tan, Courtney," I say.

"So sweet, baby! Now drive."

I drive for twenty minutes to the Inferno. You can hear the music thudding two blocks away—anonymous European techno trash merged with Rihanna or whoever the diva of the month is. Courtney applies some more makeup. Her face is already caked with the stuff.

"Let's go, JonBenét."

She sprays on some $200 perfume (this is why she doesn't have a car), like the gays inside give a damn.

The guy at the door checks our id's and puts circles on our hands. He raises his eyebrow when he looks at my crappy license picture. So I don't meet your glamorous expectations, what is it—Ron, his nametag says. Wait, I think I blew him a couple months ago. Maybe that's why he raised his eyebrow. In any event, I steal a pen on his desk as punishment for whatever sin he's committed against me.

The loud thuds of the bass accost me as we enter the club, something about making out on the dance floor. Really all you have to do these days for a hit song is to sing about screwing someone and literally screw someone onstage as you do it. Courtney squeals when she realizes that it's drag night. I hate drag night. A six-foot-tall drag queen slithers and shimmies on stage, her crotch assaulting the head of some poor twink. The twink smiles and screams and tips the drag queen two dollars. His friends all yell in excitement. Everyone is yelling. Courtney and I head to the bar. She finds the one of the only straight (a term I use loosely, as a rule) guys in the place and he buys her a drink. They go dance.

No one buys me a drink. I buy a Jack and Coke. People grind into one another on the dance floor; smoke rises and green lasers traipse over the landscape. It's very J.Lo, "Waiting for Tonight." The place smells of booze, sweat, and desperation. Having recently gotten some action this evening, I'm not as desperate as some of the others. I sip my drink, checking to see if I have received any new Facebook notifications on my phone. My crops are ready to harvest in FarmVille and I'm stuck here. I refresh my homepage repeatedly (I'd written a funny status and only three people had commented) until someone sits beside me and asks me for a light. I hand him/her a lighter.

She introduces herself. Her name is K-r-y-s-t-y-n-n-e. I wonder if she has to always spell that out. Why would you choose such a difficult name? She's a pre-op transsexual but the best part is that she has diabetes and is missing a leg. Her make-up looks rough, like she's playing dress-up. I'm surprised to learn that she likes women, and relieved to know that I'm not being hit on by a one-legged transsexual. Not like I'm picky or anything, but still. She's in town for a Mary Kay conference.

"So you're a lesbian?" I ask over the speakers and drunken homosexuals. She's a lesbian, alright. I watch her watch Courtney shake her money-makers.

Courtney's grinding on Straightie McStraighterson, who, unbeknownst to him (I'm sure) is being grinded on by some random guy. I continue to chat with Krystynne. "Yeah, I'm an English ma-

jor." I might as well say I'm homeless; it would garner the same reaction. She's a salesman. But when you're a one-legged transsexual, I'm sure the makeup sells itself. I tell her I'm a senior, though it's closer to junior, considering I changed my major from Theater to History to English and now I'm just stuck. Which means I know I'll never find a real job and I'm just biding my time until I become so overwhelmed with student loans and the utter failure and lies of academe that I kill myself. "Yes, I love to write!" No one will ever read my hackneyed bullshit. I should just sell my soul and write some Twilight garbage so people will actually read me.

I look down at my cell phone. I'm on drink number three and Krystynne isn't half as annoying as she was at first. Daniel could text any minute. "Dad's gone," he might say. No he'd say, "Dad's passed on." He likes to sugarcoat things. Like passed on from where? To what? Sometimes I feel left out of the whole Christian fantasies of an afterlife thing.

"I miss my dad," I blurt out to Krystynne, hoping she can hear me over the music, that she can understand.

"What, sugar?" she asks, taking a drag of her smoke before sipping from her cocktail.

"My friend's coming over," I say quietly.

Courtney and her beau sashay over to the bar. She whispers in my ear and I say goodbye to Krystynne. She nods and looks for lesbians. I think she might be just as lonely as I am, so I like her.

Courtney introduces me to Paul. She gives him the up-and-down look like he's her prized livestock and I'm the potential buyer. He says hello in that jocky, overcompensating way. He might not be gay, but I could most certainly screw him with enough drinks in him. A guy like him should wear a warning.

"Are you cool, bro?" he asks, taking a cigarette from behind his ear and lighting it like he's John Travolta in Grease.

I stand there, perplexed. Cool about what? What? Courtney sighs and tugs on my arm. We all go outside to his ginormous truck. He has coke. Jack and coke is always a good mix.

He's going to be a dentist. He'll make more money than me. Probably my secretary will make more money than me once I have a real job. Courtney pulls out a five, some of her tip money from Waffle House. We each do a line off of a Nickelback c.d. case. He has a picture of a pretty-looking girl on his dashboard. I inquire. Turns out both he and Courtney have significant others. Paul is here with his ex-roommate Tina and her gay friends. Tina, like Courtney, is a total fag hag. Courtney does a line.

"Are you not worried about the baby?" I ask Courtney as the powder glides up her welcoming nose. Paul gives us both a

concerned look. "Oh, don't worry, Paul. She's getting it sucked out of her soon. This is our celebration."

"You're a dick," she says before looking to Paul. "He's kidding. He has a weird sense of humor. I'm not pregnant, babe."

"You still got some powder there on your nose, Susan Smith," I tell her before taking the c.d. case and indulging.

Courtney calls me an asshole and Paul mumbles something about being pro-choice. The aspirin taste reaches the back of my throat. I feel like I have to spit or I might have a nosebleed. I do another line. The rush is immediate. Paul obviously has a hookup because this isn't laced with baby laxative like some garbage. Courtney punches me. I look at her, pleading: Careful, you'll spill the coke. She still looks pissed off. Paul just looks pretty. He smiles a goofy Midwestern smile, like he just stepped off a Wheaties box. We each do a few more lines before stepping out of the truck.

As Paul checks his texts (I glance down to my phone to see that my dad is still alive) Courtney whispers to me, "I'm keeping my baby."

"Hah. Okay, whatever. Papa won't preach. Court, I feel great! I'm a monster."

"Stop being so mean to me," Courtney says, pouting.

"I'm only mean to people I love," I respond, kicking some asphalt onto her purple high heels.

"Well you must love everybody, ass," she says before squeezing my hand as we re-enter the Inferno.

Courtney kicks me, forcing me to dance with her. I owe her, she reminds me, though we've both forgotten why or what I owe her.

The music is louder now. Louder since the coke. The smoke machine is going full blast. I cough a little, inhaling more smoke. They should have complimentary face masks or something. Everything is brighter. The lasers are green and red and purple. I'm sweating already and am now starting to dance. I follow everyone's lead. Guys in tight shirts grind on guys with no shirts. Some make out with each other. I grind on Courtney like she's some bitch in a rap video, nothing but an ass. I pull her hair as Paul, on the other side, fumbles in, trying to make out with her. He's still being grinded upon by vague homosexuals. Everyone grinds on everyone, a circle of sweat, sensuality, folding in on one another. I take a strand of Courtney's hair and lick it; she laughs as Paul goes in for the kiss. I grab Courtney's body, my hands digging into her side, possessively. She turns from Paul and kisses me. I watch as Paul eyes us, not jealous in the least, just waiting his turn, basking in all the attention he's receiving from the men around him. Courtney and I make out for a few seconds before the song changes, with

such passion that we say without saying that Paul is just one night's fun, that what we have is real.

Jolly Roger, I love this song! My heart is racing. I'm actually dancing, which never happens. I used to dance and make videos when I was a boy but people stopped watching. I forgot the steps. The techno remix blares: "Coming out of my cage and I've been doing just fine; gotta gotta be down because I want it all. It started out with a kiss, how did it end up like this?" It was only a kiss! It was only a kiss! I'm fagging out. At least one boy likes it. He starts grinding on me. Everybody's grinding.

I turn around and face the random guy feeling my ass. I recognize him from online: bhamcockgoblin24. "I'm Jack!" I feel great. I turn my head as I speak, animated. Everyone is so pretty. His name is Jack, too.

"Omigosh. That is so weird!" I yell as he laughs like I'd said something clever. He's struggling for conversation. He's dumber than me. I say something witty and it barely registers for him. Usually I'd question all of civilization. I mean, I try so hard to be funny and impress people and they scarcely notice and certainly don't reciprocate the entertainment. But I'm messed up so I don't care. He's prettier than me, which means so much in Gay Land.

We grab each other's asses as we dance to the song. Sweat, now, pouring all over my face. I look back at Courtney. She's making out with Paul. Other Jack tells me he has to pee. "I thought you'd never ask!" I yell. He looks at me strangely.

We both pee and I, never one to make the first move, leap on him and start making out with him. He tells me he has a boyfriend. I tell him oral sex isn't cheating. Besides, I've seen him cruising the web for sex. You can't fool me, bhamcockgoblin24. I still feel the burn in my nose as we go into the stall and I get down on my knees. Another successful first date.

We finish our encounter and casually walk out of the stall. I ask if he wants my number and he tells me he'll just find me online. Our date is over. I check my reflection in the lipstick-stained mirror. My hair is stuck to my head from all the sweating. My face is flush, from the drugs or what I just did in the stall I'm unsure. I rub my chapped lips and open my eye lids with my fingers, admiring how bloodshot they are. Two boys sneak into the now-vacant stall, laughing and not acknowledging me. Good thing no one actually has to use the bathroom here. I wash my hands, splashing water on my face.

I flip my phone up to see if Daniel has messaged me. I chuckle a bit to myself, wondering what my dying dear-old-Dad would say if I busted up into his hospital room now, reeking of cigarettes, semen, and alcohol, coked-up and flamboyant as hell.

"Jesus, Jack," I say to myself as I hear zippers and laughter from the stall. I exit the restroom.

I search the now-dwindling dance floor. A few bull dykes and drunken drag queens but no Courtney. I text her. I go and get another drink. I sit at the bar and down two more drinks before she texts me back. She's out at the truck. I stumble outside after tipping the attractive bartender generously.

I look over the parking lot and the truck is not there. I call Courtney and she doesn't answer. Boys exit the club, some hand-in-hand, others hand-in-pants. Other Jack doesn't make eye contact with me as he hops in his car. I lean against my car, unable to drive, paralyzed and abandoned in this lame-ass parking lot.

I get in my car and light a cigarette, still watching everyone pour out of the Inferno. My phone vibrates and sings some obnoxious pop song. Finally, Courtney is coming back to rescue me. Maybe she can rescue me.

"Hey, you bitch. Come back," I slur into the phone.

"Jack?" Daniel's voice.

"Oh. Hey. Did Dad, um—"

"Yeah. Mom's in pretty bad shape. Do you think you can be here in the morning?"

"I think so, Danny boy," I say flippantly, wanting to break the tension of our father's death. I listen to the silence on the other end.

"Okay," he finally says, telling me he loves me before hanging up.

I sit in the car, waiting on tears that do not come. The bar is closing. The bright lights go out, the smoke and fog dissipating into the night. The bartender locks up and calls someone, smiling. I realize there is not one single person in my address book who is capable of making me smile like that.

The parking lot is black, save for a single light above my car. I sit there, willing myself into a sober state, failing miserably. I try to think about how much my life sucks now that my dad is dead but that doesn't do the trick. I resign myself to staying the night in the parking lot, to meeting up with Courtney in the morning and heading home.

I wish Courtney were here, jeez. Now all I have are my thoughts and that's a piss-poor consolation prize. The street light above me begins to flicker. From the angle in my car, it looks like a lightning storm above me. I watch moths crash toward the light as it continues its dance between life and death. Soon it loses all its light and I flick my cigarette lighter on, shuddering at the dark.

Hana

Adia Dabit

When I am eighteen, my parents decide that I am old enough to be married and that it should be done so immediately. They do not listen when I say I am not ready, it is not what I want. So they pick my wife. They meet her family, and everyone is in agreement that we should be married to each other. When I first see her, I am underwhelmed. I do not find her attractive to my usual standards, but I know there will be no appeasing my parents, to argue with them is pointless and shameful. The second time I see her, I am better prepared and have accepted the inevitable. She is still not a beauty queen, but maybe there is something in her that will make up for this. She is not ugly; her body is young, her hair long. Her family is poor--- chicken farmers. Since the family believes that the birth of a girl is one of the worst events that can happen to a family ("We are raising her for someone else"), she is lean; the best meal of her life will be eaten at her wedding.

She is not marrying into royalty and she knows it. And although I am good-looking enough, I know that I have my own flaws besides being poor; still, we are richer than her family could ever hope to be. Perhaps the thing that bonds us is this: that we are both thrust into a situation that is completely unavoidable and unwanted. We live in a time where we are told what to do, and unless someone wants to be cast out, they do it without question, and happily so.

But I am not happy. I marry Saiyida, and the pictures taken at our wedding are mirthless. There are no smiles on either of us in a single one. We dance, because it is what is expected, and when we are shown to our room, the consummation is clumsy, quick, and without romance. She might have cried afterwards.

We live with my parents and siblings. Part of the reason for my early marriage is to add another hand to the house. It is a gamble, hoping the new wife will contribute more than she burdens. Saiyida does a good job though, and I think maybe one day I could love her. She is good with my small sister, who enjoys having another girl around, and she does what she can for the other children. I watch her clean the walls and floor with my mother one day when I come home for lunch, and the curve of her back as she

works makes me know that it's good for love to come after marriage.

The days continue on as such: my father, younger brother Shad, and I work together every day, and at night there she is. Saiyida, the helper, cleaning the house with my mother, running errands for her if the store is close by and owned by family, and cooking meals that somehow manage to fill us up and be comforting, even if we still scrounge and bargain for every grain of rice we buy for our large family.

In 1949, Saiyida tells me she is pregnant for the first time, and although she is filled up with the happiness of imminent motherhood, I can't help but wonder about the strain this is going to put on the household. I am the oldest brother by three years, and I am nineteen when my first child is born into a home that already houses my parents, six brothers, and a nine-year-old sister. My youngest brother, Adam, is only three.

My next child is born the year after, and Saiyida has lost her elegance of body. I know it is selfish to think, and this is a normal thing to happen after two childbirths. Her breasts sag, and the girth of her middle is apparent even in the loosest of garments. She feels the weight in an emotional way and begins to hide her body from me. At night when I try to make love to her, she pushes me away, angry that it is me that has made her body this way. She is uncomfortable with herself, and as her esteem drops, her impatience grows.

Where before Saiyida was the happy helper, she now feels unappreciated, and with two children to care for, along with feeding ten others (not including herself), she is tired. My younger brothers and sister try her patience on occasion, as all children do. It is part of their growing up, but Saiyida feels personally affronted, and once she even strikes Adam on the hand for a smart retort he makes. I say once because Saiyida never hit anyone except her own children again. After the slap on the hand, my parents become so angry they tell her to walk the four miles to her brother's house so she has somewhere to sleep. She does so, and when she comes back two days later, she regrets what she has done and brings Adam and my sister a hard candy each. But this also displeases my mother and father, and they tell her that if she is going to get candy for some of them, it isn't fair, she must bring candy for all of them.

Saiyida becomes more and more withdrawn, and the truth is I can't blame her. She didn't ask for this life, and now she can't

seem to get anything right.

The toll is taken on her, and its effects emanate from her. She becomes harder to deal with and snappish. She is pregnant for the third time when I am twenty-two. In a fit one day after a big argument with my family, she tries to lose the child.

It started with Yaba arguing with her about the amount of salt in the food. He looked at Yama and asked who seasoned the rice. My mother answered him, "Saiyida." He looked at Saiyida, who has been cooking for him every day since she married me, and told her that she did a horrible job. She apologized, mentioning that maybe her taste buds were off because of the baby, and told him he could add more salt to it now. My father became angry. He yelled at her that all day long he worked so her fat ass could eat, and instead she ruins the food he breaks his back for. He added that if he was going to add salt to it, he might as well just make the whole damn meal himself.

"Would you like that? I come home after working for twelve hours and cook, so it can be done right? Selfish and ungrateful; we take good care of you, and we never hear thank you. You are rude just like the rest of your cheap family. Your father is so cheap, he didn't even want to feed you. Now you have all this food, you don't know what to do with it!"

Her eyes welled up with tears, then, gracefully, she left the table. Soon, you could hear her in our room throwing things about. I finished eating to give her time to cool down, then went to her.

"Your family is horrible, and I am not staying here. I hate him; I HATE HIM! If he hates my family so much, then why did I have to marry you?"

I answer back, "Oh, yes, it's so bad you had to marry me; well, I didn't want to get married at all. Especially not to you. I didn't even like you the first time I saw you. If I would have known you were going to get fat and ungrateful, I would have killed myself instead!"

"I wish you wouldn't have married me! They brought me here to make me their slave!"

Then she starts hitting herself in the stomach, throwing herself on the ground, trying to lose our child. I pick her up and slap her face, telling her to stop or I will tell everyone what she

is doing. I let her know that if anything is wrong with that baby, I swear to God, I will kill her.

Saiyida is in her fifth month of pregnancy, and she has remained sullen throughout. She barely speaks to anyone in the house, and never to my father. She talks to me in mutters, not completely trusting me. I try to make her understand that she is causing too much tension in the house, but she tells me I'm insensitive and that I don't care about anyone but myself, that I'm just like my father. I grab her arms so hard she actually cries out. I tell her to shut up and listen. She needs to keep her mouth closed and just do what she's told to do. My wife looks at me with a long, cold stare. She is not a broken woman; she is a furious one. But she keeps it inside and lets it seethe, doubling over on itself without release.

One night, I fight with my father. My mother demands that I respect him, although he is causing more trouble between me and Saiyida. In fact, he is trying to cause trouble between Saiyida and everyone in the family, including his brothers. I try to remain calm and reasonable, telling him that this doesn't solve anything, it just keeps making more problems. He's the one that chose her family, chose her. If he didn't like her family or their ways, shouldn't he have thought about that before binding us together for life? I tell him that I can't live like this in all the conflict, somehow always being in the center, somehow being blamed. I don't like having to choose sides, and there's no way they are ever going to stop.

I do love my wife. One morning earlier that week, I saw her in the bath. This pregnancy had actually made her lose some weight. Her belly swollen with child, breasts full in expectation of the new life to feed. Her face was warm and pink from the heat of the water. I sat on the floor near her and talked to her, noticing that her arms and neck were tighter than they had been recently. She looked truly beautiful, glowing, and I remembered that what grew inside her was mine. I felt good about this thing we had done together, and I kissed her forehead before I stood to leave. As I walked away, she called, "Hana?"

I turned.

Her eyes watered over, and her voice shakily said, "Ana behebick."

I told her I loved her too.

Because I love my wife, and because I love my family, I made the decision to leave.

The French Muse

Aida Dabit

Hot tea for me and a beer for you. Lovelorn and sunworn. Think I'm worn out from swimming and sinking, and you're lying around getting high just from thinking. I'd say I don't know what I want from you but that would be a lie since I do.

It's lies, lies, lies, manipulation and blah blah blah and I need to wash my hands when I see what you really are.

I wrote down dates.

So you know.

This time waiting on dating and there's only so much of me to take in and give away and I can't give you that much always, as much as you wantwantwant.

Threes, they say. It happens in threes.

Writing you in so I can write you off, where'd it go wrong, why and which way, because I know there's a reason for everything as much as you deny,deny,deny.

Hmmm... he said his name was _____.

I'm cool with that, I can roll with it. Take my licks, my hits, my punches to the gut, it just becomes beating a dead horse and then it's just numbnumbnumb.

It's Sunday now. Hope it's sunny and beautiful and you're trapped inside, underwater, too many thoughts in your brain to make your head explode since you don't have a heart or you don't believe in love.

They're all just scattered reflections of each other, and at some point all these words and words and words and phrases and sen-

tences and insults and tempers and banter and flares and flair--
It just doesn't mean anything anymore.

So I'll drop you off wherever, or drop you down a notch. Drop you off my map.

He's been hiding so well, he just disappeared and then . . .
Where the hell is my muse?...?

He's moving in my music, I can feel him, know he's there, he's what I use to compare these new boys to.

Where are the men with white horses and showboats and flashy-flashyflashing teeth ?

Stoplights in the city. Street signs and graffiti.

He said he tagged buildings. In French.
I want that.

The Treehouse in Tremé

Aida Dabit

On Esplanade, if you know where to look, there is a mansion with a courtyard. And in this courtyard is an enormous golden rain tree that kisses the clouds. Now, none of that information is really that special on its own.

Here's what is:

Multiple levels of wooden platforms. Colorful plastic playhouses and slides. Hanging ropes. Metal spiral staircases. Cargo nets. Bungee cords. Abandoned playplace pieces. Open-air landings. Five stories worth of Peter Pan's best dreams.

And maybe none of that is really special on its own.

But when you see all of these things lit up against the spicy night sky of New Orleans in autumn, when you realize that this is the Treehouse your friends you left back in Alabama have been telling you about—that's when things become surreal.

Phillip refuses to follow us up. He says he's scared of heights. Once I see some of the tiny, treacherous steps with no handrails floating above nothing but air, my own small fear of heights starts to kick in. But I grab a rope that's tied around the branch of the tree and use it to help myself up. I force through my completely rational fear of falling and make my way across a cargo net that's two or three stories above the earth. William, Nick, Vance, and I end up sitting in a circle inside of a red plastic enclosure. We feel like gods. We feel like little kids.

The guys talk about their trip so far and some of the crazy things they've seen, and I talk to Vance, who I've been friends with the longest out of this group, about his birthday that I missed. After a while, I remember we've left Phillip alone on the ground.

"I feel bad. Phillip's down there by himself," I say.

"Go see if you can get him to come up," Vance says.

I crawl out of the enclosure and waveringly stagger back across the cargo net. After carefully picking my way down through metal, plastic, and wood, I tell Phillip to come up. He's hesitant at first. He tells me that I really don't grasp his sincere phobia of heights.

When I tell him some of the guys have pot, he changes his mind and follows me back up.

At some point after we've sat around for a while again, Vance and I climb down so he can show me where the bathroom is. I wander through the ground floor of the mansion, trying to figure out how this place exists, and when I come back out, I see that Vance, whose eyes somehow always look sorrowful, has waited on me. We start the climb again, but once we've made it to the first platform, he ducks left into one of the random plastic tubes that shoots off the main path of ascent. I follow him in, and while we smoke our cigarettes in the cramped enclosure he says, "If I tell you something, will you promise not to say anything to anyone?" He adjusts his old-man glasses and smoothes down his tidy brown hair.

"Yeah, sure."

"Did you know Tyler and Jack fooled around?"

I laugh. "You were actually in my apartment when Jack told us; you had a cold or something. I fixed you some orange juice and Theraflu, remember? And Jack said something about Tyler being tiny."

"Oh yeah, that was at your house. The night the power went out."

"And we'd snuck over to my place from Josh's because he had all of those obnoxious freshmen over there."

"Yeah," he says. "It's just weird to think about Tyler like that. Like, if he is gay, I don't mind that, that's cool; he should just come out. But I think most of it is that he's just slutty."

We talk some more until eventually the conversation moves to the Mardi Gras beads around my neck. "So you didn't actually flash people to get them?" he asks.

"No," I say and start to plead my case to him.

"You didn't earn those then," he says, smiling evilly and quickly pulling the beads off of my neck and over his head. "Now," he says, "if you want them back, you'll have to earn them."

"Vance, that's not fair. You didn't earn them either." I try to slip the beads off of him, but he grabs at my hands, so I pull the beads towards me and with them comes Vance's face. We're dangerously close, grins spread wide beneath devious eyes.

"Those are still mine," I say after a deafening pause, then deftly slip the beads off of him. I dangle them in front of him before I slip them back on, keeping a two-handed grip on the worthless beads around my neck. I cock my head and raise my eyebrows, bite my lower lip expectantly at him.

Vance begins to unbutton his shirt, and I feel a small pang of lust when I watch his fingers slip the buttons out of their holes. His chest is spattered with dark hair, and I unabashedly drink him in with my eyes. The tension between us is becoming an issue that inspires butterflies, giddiness, nerves. I want to touch him, but I know that I won't.

"Now I've earned them more than you did," he says, and he pulls at the strings until our faces are almost touching again. I slide one set of beads over his head while keeping it around my own neck, so for a moment we're sharing the necklace. Then I duck out from under it, relinquish the beads to him, and sit back once more, as if nothing had happened, as if I expect nothing to happen.

Later we rejoin our friends across the courtyard. The guys are swinging on a rope over what was at one time a swimming pool. They try to convince me to try it after they've all taken a turn, and at first I tell them no, that I don't want to for some number of reasons. But because we're in New Orleans and are somehow invincible, because we somehow managed to run into each other in the city that night, I'm feeling a little like tonight is my night to be brave, to do things that I might not normally do. Like it's a night I'm allowed to step outside of myself.

I back up away from the pit with the rope in my hand and slip my foot into the rope's loop. I'm not really trusting my own strength as I fling myself forward and away from solid ground. But I swing above the empty pool and the night air rushes by my ears with the waves of all of our laughter. I don't fall. And when I've lost momentum and it's time to rejoin everyone, they help steady me

while I pull my foot loose from the loop.

When everyone else starts a new rotation of turns with the rope, Vance pulls me away from the group and wordlessly begins to lead me to the highest point of the 50-foot treehouse. The platform is small and sways. It feels like the wind could send us toppling, and the round playplace pieces are loosely attached to the perch by only a few bungee cords. I take care not to touch them or lean against them after I almost send one plunging off the edge. I tentatively sit down next to Vance between the two plastic pieces. I can feel the floor moving beneath us.

"You still didn't earn those beads," he says, and we smile at each other before he once again takes hold of the beads around my neck and pulls my face to his. Only this time he draws me all the way in, and there's only a moment's hesitance before he angles his mouth toward me and we close our eyes.

Vance kisses me in the moonlight under the lights of the most European city in America. He kisses me in the open air with our friends on the ground below us. He runs his hands over me while we're surrounded by industry, decay, history, and nature. And Vance slips his fingers through mine while we share air in the feverish, brilliant colors of the treehouse in the latest hours of the night.

vC, something, something...

By Matthew M. A. Phillips

She don't like fashions, she don't like phonies
She don't like junkies, she don't like druggies
She just wants my beef bologna

Beef, beef, beef, beef bologna

-Fear
"Beef Bologna"

"Alright, that's one bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit and one large coffee. Anything else for ya' today?"

The speaker buzzed.

"Um...well, no-- but I wanted to get just the eggs and the cheese on that, if I could..." I replied.

"Yessir',' I have one bacon, egg, and cheese--"

"Right, but I don't want the bacon on it."

"What's that, Sir?"

"I just want some cheese and some eggs on a biscuit, please."

"You don't want meat on it?"

"No. Well, yes-- that's right. And I'm in a bit of a hurry, so..."

I could hear the man on the microphone shouting back to the cooks, "No meat on that biscuit!" From what I could make out, the cooks seemed pretty confused.

"Second window, Sir."

I tilted to the right so I could grab my wallet. I knew I had to be dangerously close to missing my flight. I pulled up to the second window of the drive-through. I suppose the man at the window expected to see me either hooked to an I.V., wearing a big red clown nose, or holding a video camera. At least that's the look he gave me. He seemed disappointed.

"Four dollars and sixty-seven cent."

A couple of the cooks tried to catch a glance at me through the window. I suppose they too were wondering what could be wrong with a man who doesn't want bacon on his biscuit. I handed the man a five and checked my watch.

"Here ya' go, Sir. Have a good one."

"Alright, Thanks. You too."

I remember wishing that my flight would've been later in the day. That way, I could have had a few drinks beforehand. I usually didn't have the stomach to drink too early in the day, especially when I was that hungover. But I really hated flying, so I was considering it. I decided to just pop a couple Benadryls. That always seemed to calm my nerves.

I was going to try my best to make it on time while cramming my breakfast down my throat. I got the thing unwrapped and took a bite. Tasted funny. Tasted like bacon. Damn.

Fed up, I threw the thing out the window. My flight was in nine minutes. I checked my rear-view mirror in an attempt at changing lanes. Then I saw him: Johnny Law. Nothing fills me with terror more than those red and blues. At least I was sober.

The officer walked up to my window.

"License and registration?" I asked politely.

"Tell ya' what. I'll trade ya'."

He held out half of my breakfast.

"This yours?"

"Um...oh, right. I'm really sorry about that, officer. You see--"

"I don't appreciate littering on my roads, Son. Especially when it hits my windshield at sixty-five miles an hour!"

"Your absolutely right, officer. I never litter-- I'm a vegetarian."

"A veg-- what does that have to do-- listen, don't throw shit out your car window, alright!?"

He snatched my I.D. and took it back to his car for the routine check, whatever they do with it. He walked back over to my window and handed it back to me.

"I suppose you're good to go, Son. Just respect the rules of the road from now on, alright?"

"Sure, of course. I'm really sorry--"

"Oh, and you might want to look up the word 'vegetarian' when you get a chance."

He dangled a dirty piece of bacon through the window and dropped it on my lap.

"Have a nice day, Son."

Damn.

There was no possible way to make it to the airport on time now. I was screwed. I also had nothing in my stomach but Benadryl. I started to feel drowsy. I figured I would at least be able to make it back to my apartment. I would just have to call my

Mother when I got there.

I unlocked the door and threw my suitcase on the sofa. I filled a glass of water from the faucet and opened the fridge. If there had been anything in there, I wouldn't have been going through that drive-through in the first place. I wondered if there was real meat in cat food. I went for the black banana on the counter instead.

I pulled out my cell phone and looked for Mom's number. I hit "send" and waited.

"Hello?"

"Mom? Hey, it's Will. Listen, I'm really sorry. I'm not going to make it to the wedding. You see, there was this biscuit--"

"Did you say Phil? I don't know any Phil. You must have--"

"No, Mom. It's your son, William. Ringing any bells?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know anything about biscuits, Sir. I'm going to hang up now."

"Mom? Wait. Are you alright, Mom?"

Dial Tone.

Alright. Well, that was even more complicated than the rest of my morning, I thought. How many of those pills did I take again?

I hit "Mom" on my cell again and waited for her to pick up. No answer that time. Weird.

I wasn't sure what to do. Maybe I would call Dad. I thought about calling Sal, but who wants to tell their brother that they won't be attending their wedding? I bit the bullet and hit "send." There was a lot of noise on the other end. It sounded like a party.

"Pizza Hut-- What can I get for 'ya?"

"Sal? Is that you?"

"We don't have salad, Sir. Would you like some breadsticks?"

"Seriously, Sal. Listen, I'm not going to make it to--"

Dial tone.

"What the hell?"

I started to get annoyed. I rubbed my eyes and tried to evaluate my situation. Either they were playing a cruel joke on me or something strange was happening. I figured I'd check the news, just in case. This was one of those times when I regretted selling my T.V. I walked over to my computer and searched for some news sites. At least the internet seemed to be working.

I saw that there were some live-streaming news feeds, and I clicked the first one on the list. I felt like the man at the drive-through window must have. I expecting to see something very strange appear before me. Unfortunately, I wasn't disappointed.

What I saw should have scared me, but I couldn't help but let out a cough of a laugh. The reporters behind the news desk were, well, it looked like they were doing The Robot-- except sort of sped up. And way more shaky and uncoordinated. Their arms would sort of whip out from their bodies, and then their shoulders would start to quiver. Lots of shaking. I guess it really didn't look anything like The Robot, but I couldn't really relate it to anything else. I didn't know a lot of dances.

After three of four minutes, I snapped out of it and realized I needing to do something. I didn't have a clue what to do. Who was I kidding? What was I going to do? It seemed like the whole world was losing it. Could they be zombies? I don't think zombies dance, or whatever. But there was that "Thriller" video...

"Snap out of it, man!" I told myself. "There's no such thing as a zombie!"

But what was I to think? I was seeing it with my own eyes, for God's sake! I walked outside to see what the hell was going on in the rest of my complex. Gary and Larry were sitting on their porch, sipping Mimosas.

"UH-OH, GARY! IT'S OUR SEXY LITTLE NEIGHBOR BOY! COME HAVE A DRINK WITH US WILLY!"

"Hey guys, have you noticed anybody acting sort of strange lately?"

"WHATEVER DO YOU MEAN, SWEETIE?"

"Well, I called my Mother--"

"OH, HOW IS BESSIE? I HAVEN'T SEEN HER IN--"

"Look, she's fine. But I was looking at the news and--"

"OH, YOU CAN'T WATCH THAT CRAP, WILLY. BUNCH OF RIGHT WING--"

"Larry. Listen to me. Something very weird is going on here. You have to--"

"WELL, WHAT DID YOU SEE WILLY? SOMEBODY GET SHOT?"

"Um, well no. They were sort of..."

"SORT OF WHAT, WILLY?"

"Well, they were kind of...doing The Robot..."

"OH SHIT GARY! YOU KNOW THAT'S MY SHIT!"

Gary and Larry, laughing hysterically, proceeded to stand up from their reclined lawn chairs and engage in a much more synchronized version of the outdated dance than those folks on the news. I wasn't getting anywhere this way.

"So, you guys haven't noticed anything peculiar going on?"

"SWEETIE, RELAX. IT WAS PROBABLY JUST SOME YOUTUBE VIDEO OR SOMETHIN'. EVERYTHING'S FINE, RIGHT GARY?"

Gary was much too focused on perfecting his Robot to respond.

"Alright. Thanks anyway, guys. I'll catch ya' later."

"YOU STAY SEXY, WILLY! STOP WORRYING SO MUCH!"

I walked down the stairs and decided to take a look around the neighborhood. Gary and Larry seemed more than fine, and I felt O.K. Maybe I was overreacting? I knew what I had seen, though, and what about Mom and Sal?

It didn't take me long at all to realize that the boys upstairs were wrong. There were people up and down the sidewalk, all having spasms and convulsing, just like on the news. Some of them were walking in tiny circles, talking to themselves. I saw a man wearing a clown nose pushing a guy on a hospital gurney. He was hooked to an I.V. There was a man following them with a camera. Damn.

None of them seemed violent, though. None of their flailing limbs seemed to have a target. The ones who seemed be be losing their minds pretty much kept to themselves. It wasn't everybody, though. I noticed a jogger who had been running in my direction slow to a near stop. He kept walking, but was trying to take in his surroundings. Like me, he wasn't necessarily afraid for his life. It just seemed that he really couldn't believe his eyes. I headed his way, and we met in the middle of the street.

"Hey," I said.

"Hello," he said cautiously.

"Do you have any clue what in the world is going on around here?"

"No at all. I knew six miles was too much--"

"No, you're fine. It's not just you. I'm seeing it too. Even on the news."

"Well, what's going on? Zombies?"

"I don't think so...at least not yet."

"Hmm. Well, what should we do? Call the police?"

Great. The police. Twice in one day, I thought.

"I suppose we might as well. Maybe they're still, y' know, normal."

I pulled out my cell and dialed 911. I was a little surprised to hear someone answer.

"911-- What's the emergency?"

"Hi, my name is William Ross. Have you happened to receive any calls about some really strange behavior today?"

"Mr. Ross, this is an emergency line. If you don't have an emergency, please hang up the phone."

"Wait, wait, alright. Umm, I have an emergency on the

corner of Stern and Vine."

"What is the nature of your emergency, Mr. Ross?"

Don't say The Robot, don't say The Robot, I thought.

"Uh...there's been a robbery. That's right! My apartment has been robbed...by...robbers! They took my T.V."

"Lock your doors and windows, Mr. Ross. I'm sending a patrol car your way."

"Right. Thank you, Ma'am."

"Robbers? What did you tell them?" asked the jogger.

"Look, If you want to try and explain what we're seeing right now, be my guest. I've tried once today, and it doesn't go over too well. We'll just have to show them."

"You're the boss, William Ross."

"It's Will, and what was your name?"

"Pete. Pete Steinmann."

"Nice to meetcha' Pete, but we need to get back to my apartment to meet the police. You comin' or not?"

"I suppose so. I want to see how you explain lying to them."

"Necessary evil. Let's go."

By the time we got back down the road, we could already see the patrol car rolling up. The driver's-side door opened and out stepped Mr. Law. Johnny Law to be exact.

"Oh, my God," I uttered. "This isn't happening."

"Yeah, it's freaky isn't it?" Pete said. "That guy over there is wearing a clown nose."

I sighed and waited for the officer to recognize me. It took about three seconds.

"If it isn't Oscar Meyer himself!" the officer exclaimed. "Glad I didn't bring my K-9 with me, with you skipping breakfast and all!"

"Listen, officer--"

"Has there been a robbery here, Son? Are you the one that made the 911 call?"

"Well, not exactly. You see--"

The officer took a step toward me.

"Are you telling me you've been prank calling the emergency line? Do you know I could take you in for that, boy!?"

Just then a teenage boy ran up behind the officer and jumped on his back.

"Piggy-Back! Piggy-Back!" shouted the boy.

"What in the-- You get off of me right now! I am an officer of the law!"

They wrestled around a bit, and the officer eventually had to force the kid off, causing him to land on his back on the cement.

"DID YOU SEE THAT GARY? THAT PO-PO JUST THREW THAT POOR BOY ON THE STREET!" Larry shouted.

Larry and Garry were leaning over the balcony railing and watching our every move.

"Gentlemen, go inside. There's nothing to see here. Everything is under control," said the officer.

"IT SURE AS HELL DOESN'T LOOK UNDER CONTROL, PO-PO! JUST LOOK AROUND!"

It was then that the officer noticed everyone else on the street. The boy he knocked to the ground had started doing push-ups and reciting what sounded like Latin. The man on the gurney was barreling down the hill at the end of the street. I saw the man with the camera eat the clown nose right off of the other man's face. The officer was stunned.

"I think I'm gonna be needing some backup. What have you seen out here today?"

"This is it," I said. "But it's the same way on the news and--"

"On the news? The same way?"

The officer stumbled back a couple of steps, like he might pass out.

"Whoa!" I yelled. "Pete, help me with this guy!"

We caught the officer by the shoulders and decided we ought to head up the stairs. Larry and Gary were waiting at the top, just as confused as the rest of us. Well all went inside my apartment. I moved my suitcase, and we laid the officer on the sofa. I handed him a glass of water.

"Here. Drink this," I told him. "You're supposed to be the one figuring this stuff out!"

He took a sip, then a gulp, then splashed the rest on his face.

"O.K. You're right," said the officer. Then he said something in cop language into his walkie-talkie.

"There's no answer," he said. "Just Static."

We all looked around the room at each other. Larry and Gary were looking for something to eat in the fridge. One too many Mimosas, I figured.

"WILLY, YOU DON'T HAVE NOTHIN' IN THIS FRIDGE! YOU'RE GONNA STARVE TO DEATH! WE'RE GONNA STARVE TO DEATH! WE NEED WATER BOTTLES! CANNED FOOD! OH, HOLD ME GARY!"

Larry started to cry on Gary's shoulder. I can't say I blamed him. The situation was getting out of hand.

"The Nancy-Boy is right! We need water and...and ice! Cans! Lots of cans! Vienna Sausages! Beanie Weenie!" the officer shouted. He sounded like he was loosing what cool he had left.

"MY BABY IS NOT GONNA EAT NO BEANIE WEENIES! DOES HE LOOK LIKE A MURDERER TO YOU?"

"What do you mean? A murderer?" asked the officer.

"WE HAVEN'T EATEN MEAT IN SIXTEEN YEARS! I'D RATHER BE DOIN' PUSH-UPS DOWN THERE WITH THAT LITTLE BOY YOU ATTACKED!"

"Oh, great! More vegetarians!" he replied.

"Hey, what's wrong with that?" asked Pete.

"You too? I'm surrounded..." scoffed the officer. "Well, I'm going back to the station to see why no one is answering my walkie. I suggest you all stay inside and sing 'Kumbaya'."

He stood up to leave, but instantly plopped back down on the sofa. He tried to get up a second time, but he seemed to be losing control of his body. Next thing we knew, he was using the glass I gave him as a microphone. He was singing "Thriller" at the top of his lungs. Then it hit me.

"Alright," I said. "I'm just going to throw this out there. So, no one in this room eats meat?"

I glanced around the room. They were all shaking their heads.

"And we all feel fine, right?" I asked.

Everyone seemed to think about it for a second, and then began nodding.

"Does anyone else think that might have something to do with the fact that we're not trying out for American Idol like Mr. Law over there?"

"I suppose that seems reasonable enough," Pete said.

"WELL, MAYBE HONEY! YOU TELL ME!" Larry replied. Gary just nodded.

"I'm no scientist, but I think it's just as possible as anything else at this point," I said.

"Well, how can we know for sure?" asked Pete.

"MY STYLIST IS A VEGETARIAN. I COULD CALL HER AND SEE IF SHE'S O.K.," Larry suggested.

"Sure, why not?" I replied.

Larry picked up his cell phone and hit a few buttons. We all waited in silence. It all seemed a little too ridiculous. Finally, Larry's eyes cut toward the phone.

"HELLO? SHEILA? IS THAT YOU, BABY? OH, I'M SO GLAD TO HEAR YOU'RE VOICE, BABY! WHAT? NO, I DON'T HAVE A FASHION EMERGENCY. LISTEN, BABY, LOOK OUT YOUR WINDOW FOR ME. UH-HUH. ALRIGHT. WHAT DO YOU SEE BABY? WHAT NOW? O.K. BABY. LISTEN, YOU JUST STAY INSIDE. I'LL CALL YOU BACK. JUST STAY IN YOUR HOUSE!"

Larry hung up the phone.

"What did she say?" I asked. We couldn't wait any longer.
"WELL, SHE SAID..."
"Yeah? She said..."
"SHE SAID EVERYBODY ON HER STREET..WAS..DOING..."
He pointed at the officer.
"..THE ROBOT."

***

Things are different now. There aren't any more burger joints or taco huts, at least not like the ones most people were used to. No more slaughterhouses or butcher shops. You see, it turns out that Mad Cow Disease, or what they call vC, something, something in humans, can remain dormant within the body for over twenty years. That's a long time. All those Mad Cow scares from the 80's and 90's didn't turn out so well after all.

Those of us who didn't eat meet are fine. Everybody else, well, let's just say the last few months weren't pretty. It only got worse. Eventually, the rest of the meat-eaters were going wild with tremors. Most got Dementia. They never got violent, they just went insane. The government, what little was left of it anyway, decided to just let it run its course. They were still human, after all. Most of the infected ones have died off one way or another-- walking off cliffs, lots of different things put into light sockets. It became sort of comical after a while. I think they made a T.V. show about it.

Needless to say, nobody eats beef any more. Most people have given up meat all together. Milk, cheese, ice cream. You name it. Too scared to risk it. Who can blame them? We all lost a lot. Mom, Dad, Sal. All gone. We all grieved, but life goes on. We couldn't just give up. In fact, we all felt a little pride after a while. Turns out all those bar-b-ques we missed didn't mean a whole lot when all was said and done.

So, now we start fresh. At least we'll probably be a healthier race this time around. There's also the matter of making up for all those we lost. There has been a government mandate to "Do your best! Fill your nest!" Pete and Sheila are really enjoying that. Things really aren't too bad now. I just feel sorry for Johnny Law. He's still kickin', and Larry and Gary never get tired of doing The Robot with him.

The Method

Jonathan Rutan

Brian Ewing laid out the supplies. The fully loaded magazine, the gleaming black rifle, and the scope with its crosshair sight that he would make sure to attach just before he aimed in. He even had a lunch box left open, and set to his right, where he could easily roll over to retrieve a soda, or a sandwich. He was nothing if not thorough, and he did have time to spare.

As he lay down on a blanket, got comfortable in a position he knew he could keep for hours on end, he took out the soda. Barely a sound could be heard as he slowly opened the can. He was that silent, whenever he was on the hunt.

Looking at a watch on his wrist he noted the time-five minutes, and then four. He loved how he had trained his endurance to withstand almost anything. He could stare at a digital read out of numbers (fast little seconds quickly running along, the minutes and hours barely ticking by) and be lost in the sheer bliss of patience. A more complete joy came in the report, the crack when a trigger was pulled, the flash of red as his bullet struck its target, but some pleasure could still be found in the waiting. He'd learned that in the Corps. He'd learned that even more in prison. Patience had its virtues.

He reached over to the thick shrubbery in front of him, and pushed aside a tangle of leaves. On the hillside where he lay he had a perfect view onto a path below. A wild wood surrounded much of everything, but what he was looking at now was the one open glade for miles around. To his left a small dirt road came out from behind a large clump of knotted trees, and to his right everything rolled back down into overgrown shrubs, and winding vines. Most of what was around him was closed in, but to his front all was wide open beauty. Anyone entering into his glade would be trapped in his sights in an instant.

His watch clicked over to the time he was waiting for. Brian

attached the scope to the rifle, shoved the magazine home, and made sure a round was safely in the chamber as he also gave himself the luxury of getting a quick bite from his sandwich before he aimed in. Usually it was after it was over, when people were scurrying about, looking here, there, wondering where the shot had come from, that he would eat. They never found him, and he loved to enjoy that. For a while he had even thought that he was the only one, the single assassin who ever prepared so much he could relax in the midst of chaos because he was always in the one spot that would be the center of calm.

But then he was taught a harsh lesson. He wasn't unique; he wasn't even the best in his field. The best was a man who took preparation to a whole other level.

But that would end soon. The number one killer in the entire world, his mentor, was about to take his daily hike in the woods. The pinnacle of murderers, a man known only as "The Method," was about to be retired, and it was going to be he who would do the deed.

Brian looked through his scope. He was still early, by a good three minutes, but he'd been taught that this was merely the wisest thing to do. No more bringing up his gun right when he was about to fire. No more chance encounters where he stumbled upon some poor target, and threw them against a wall again and again. He had learned that to arrive early, and let the target come to you, was the best avenue to take. It fit with his love of patience so much he wished that he had thought of it himself.

The scope panned the entire length of the glade. Only two minutes to go, then one, it was so close he was shaking with excitement. He wondered briefly if The Method could somehow feel that he was about to die, but as quickly as that thought came, Brian pushed it aside. He'd been too careful; this was his masterpiece not anyone else's.

Brian saw movement on the path. He swung his rifle over, made sure to keep his breath steady, and waited. It was almost over.

Two years before, he awoke to find a man in his apartment. Brian

had been asleep, as deep into it as his training would allow, when suddenly he was up. He discovered that a man was sitting on the one chair that was always kept propped against his bedroom door.

"You're good," the man said. He was all shadow and form, no clear substance only the vague outline of arms and legs.

"What?" Brian asked, inching his way slowly to the corner of his mattress, if he could just get to the nightstand on his right. "How did you get in here?"

"Interesting," the man replied. He moved forward, jumping up from the chair to enter into a vague halo of light making its way through an open window. Moonlight caught his angular face, and bounced off a revolver he was holding. Brian froze. Going for the nightstand was pointless. "The first question most people ask is who I am, but you're not concerned about that are you. You just want to know how I got past your simplistic alarm system. Do you really that think a chair jammed against a door, and motion sensors in the hallway, would stop me?"

"You have my gun," Brian sighed, his eyes never leaving the weapon that the man still held. "What do you want?"

"To retire," the man smiled, returning to the chair and sitting back down.

"Who are you?"

"The question I was waiting for," the man replied, "but one that I don't need to answer. You know who I am. Or at least I think you know of my methods."

As soon as he entered the glade, Brian could tell that he'd picked the right day. The Method was wearing his favorite outdoor attire, worn blue jeans, rugged hiking boots, and a checkered red flannel shirt that Brian had seen on many occasions. In the city, when they were after some poor fool who'd run across the wrong people, it was grey suits and high polished, well-glossed, shoes. But out in the woods, in The Method's own backyard, Brian had gotten accustomed to more casual apparel. On this day he merely had

the luck of choosing the moment when his target was wearing just the right outfit. What better way to kill a man then when he was completely at ease. At least that was what The Method always said.

The thought caused Brian to pause. He had his moment, the target was lined up perfectly in the crosshairs, but something was off. Maybe The Method knew he was there?

Brian moved his scope. He took in the slow gait, and the casual smile on The Method's face. For the past few weeks he'd been so careful, telling The Method he was going to stay inside, letting him enjoy his walks alone, and then following behind to get to know him that much more. He'd been a ghost, a silent breeze that even The Method couldn't have noticed. He was sure of it.

The Method suddenly stopped. In the middle of the glade, his face a warm ray of contentment, he turned towards the hill that Brian was upon. There was that smile, a warm grin never before seen. Brian focused his sights, and knew that he should have never thought that he could fool his mentor.

Had he planned this all along?

"Not yet," The Method said, grabbing hold of Brian's arm.

"But she's getting away," Brian replied.

"She isn't. What have I been teaching to you all these months?"

Brian stared at the disappearing form of their target. He wasn't quite sure what she had done, dumped the wrong man, stumbled onto the wrong information, but she was his next paycheck, and he'd just let her walk out of a nice side alley where a quick shot to her head would have been the end of it. He'd been patient as they followed her until he was certain she was all alone, but how much more did he have to give? There was a line between being diligent in your preparation, and letting someone escape, and he was pretty sure they had just crossed it.

"You've been telling me that in order to kill someone you first

have to get to know them," Brian replied.

"Yes, my way of completing a contract," The Method sighed. "When you know someone, when you have them come to like you, maybe even love you, then and only then is it safe to judge them, to discover why they deserve to die. Any other way is just too messy."

"You're insane,"

"Never said I wasn't, but you're insane as well so I guess that makes us more alike. It is why I chose you."

This was new information. The Method kept stuff to himself, his name, where he lived, and the only thing ever learned was that he wanted out of the business, and he'd chosen Brian to be his protégé before he left. But now there was more. He and The Method were alike, Brian had no clue how that could be.

"We're alike in how we entered into the trade," The Method explained before Brian could say a word. "I too was an impassioned youth who found success in death while serving my country. I played all sides as long as the money rolled in. I would kill quickly, with your level of patience, but still quickly. I had no discipline and I, like you, also made mistakes."

"I never..."

"David Anders," The Method interrupted, his eyes holding Brian in their grasp until Brian had to look away.

"He didn't testify," Brian finally said. "I completed the contract."

"You were an animal," The Method replied. "You didn't know him, you never found out why he should be killed, and so you rushed in and botched the job. Did you really have to murder those cops, and that young girl, just so you could leave him in a coma?"

"How do you know this?"

"I know you. You have the skill, but right now you're just the same monster I used to be. If I'm to leave this business then I want to help someone as I once was helped. I want to give you all the discipline I was given."

"Someone trained you?" Brian asked. He couldn't believe it.

This day was turning out to be a virtual treasure trove of valuable information.

"Yes," The Method replied, "I was trained by a man quite like me, another brother in the trade who took a wild boy with a gift for murder, and made him into a gentleman."

"But you still kill."

"Of course I kill, but as I'm trying to show you even death can be done properly. Get to know your victims, enter their lives, and when you understand their faults, why they need to die, then and only then do you lead them to a spot without getting any innocent bystanders hurt in the process. Sometimes the target is even grateful, almost relieved, that you will be the person to kill them."

"So I just make sure they're worthy of the contract," Brian asked. "You're saying I need to see why I should take someone's life?"

"It's a judgment about the trigger. You need to find out why you should pull it at all."

"Well at least I don't have to worry about not pulling it," Brian laughed.

He thought it a funny little aside. No assassin in history had ever not taken the shot, but The Method's icy reaction made his laughter catch in his throat. Was there a time not to shoot?

"You've got to be kidding me," he said. "You've actually had a moment when you didn't eliminate a target? When,"

"For every contract I found a reason to complete it," The Method replied. "Each target was judged, and was rather quickly found wanting except for one. I paused when I had him in my sights."

"Who,"

"It took me a while to understand," The Method continued, "to see the beauty of how he put order into what we do. But once I had it I used it on him."

"Who,"

"My mentor," The Method sighed. "In the end he needed to be judged as he had judged others, and he wanted someone who loved him to decide."

"And what happened?"

"When I had him in my sights?"

"Yeah, you paused but did you finally pull the trigger?"

"We need to go," The Method replied as he and Brian got back to hunting the woman they were going to kill.

Brian played the scope over, and over, the Method's face. That damn smile was still there, and then it was gone.

There was movement on his lips. Brian focused his sights even more down towards the Methods mouth. He was whispering something. It looked like "I pulled," or "I fooled," but Brian wasn't sure.

He twisted the scope of his rifle again, and again, until its sights were at there limits. He was as up close as he could be; the thin line of the Methods lips as clear as he could make them. The words were almost identified, and he kept looking down as hard as he could. Whatever the Method was saying it had to be important, Brian was sure of it.

For three long months, he followed David Anders. He made sure he knew the exact route the man took to work. He was certain he memorized the layout of his house until each turn, each hidden corner, was etched into his mind. It was the most preparation he'd ever done on a target.

He knew about the small security detail. The cops, and the prosecuting attorney, mistakenly thinking that the case was so inconsequential nothing more would be needed. Brian had no trouble putting two quick bullets into each officer's head. The mess was minimal. It was such a great start.

But he hadn't checked the back door. It was a foolish mistake, one he could have let go as a rookie maneuver if he weren't already such a professional. The door was never used, it led out only into a narrow and dirty alleyway, and when he inspected it before he naturally had made his own assumption. No one would ever go out of it. No one would ever come in through it either. On the night he entered into David Anders house, he hadn't bothered to check it.

But if he had gotten involved in Anders life, had come to really know the man, he would have seen his error immediately. Back when her parents lived together, it was through that door that Anders only daughter loved to run out, and escape into a park just a ways off from where that alleyway ended. She would ignore her mother's pleas, and her father's warnings, all five years of age going on forever. That back door was her way in and out of the house, and if Brian had known that it wouldn't have been such a surprise to find her when he burst into Anders living room.

The sight of a little girl caused him to pause, and when he thought back on it he was pretty sure that it was her hair that had done it. The cascade of blond that fell innocently off her shoulders, it accentuated the angle of her face when she turned to him, a slightly bemused expression there which turned to horror when she spotted his gun.

Before she yelled he saw in her eyes a level of purity he didn't think could exist. He was sure this girl had no clue that her father had witnessed something that was going to lead to his death. She was some kind of surprising angel, his hesitation over the sight of her only allowing her father to attack.

With more conversations with a few neighbors, as he dodged cops and kept his head down, he found out later that Anders had divorced his wife two years before, and that after that he had drifted. Gaining a decent addiction to heroin, getting involved with some pretty bad people to support that addiction as well, yet still somehow keeping a job and enjoying the weekend visits he got with his daughter, Anders let his life slip from where it was supposed to have gone. Before Anders tackled him, Brian even heard him talking on the phone with his former wife. He told her that their little girl was safe.

But no matter how much Anders tried to win the day, he had no chance. He knocked the gun out of Brian's hand, smashed the silencer off and sent the thing flying, but after that Brian regained his senses. He easily knocked Anders aside, and picked up the first object he saw.

It was a brick, a loose one half out of the tiny three-step stairway that led from the lawn up to the porch of Anders house. Brian grabbed it, and when he was done, Anders skull holding a permanent dent, he made just one more assumption for the night. David Anders was dead, and he dropped the brick, and picked up his gun, before he went back inside.

The girl was screaming, and he could still see that aura of innocence in her eyes. The roar of his gun startled him. Brian had forgotten that the silencer had been ripped off, and inside that noise he didn't even realize he was firing. She'd seen him, and that was enough. He had a job to do, it had gone wrong, but it was his job, and he did it. He eliminated David Anders, and everyone else that was around.

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He had it. He aimed in at the top of the Method's skull. Whether he was being set up, or not, this was the ending he wanted. It wasn't the killing he did that was wrong it was merely how he had once carried it out that was the mistake. It was a judgment about the trigger, getting to know someone completely until you understood exactly why they needed to die.

The Method kept up his whisper. He kept saying over and over "I pulled the trigger too," as Brian let one more minute of patience elapse. He needed to savor a final few seconds, and when they were gone his gun fired and red sprayed over the ground.

Through the scope he watched. He took in the body of The Method until it went quite cold. His training was complete.

Until Death Do Us Part

Beau Buchanan

I could feel myself about to wake up, but I didn't want to. It was the same dream I'd been having for the last few weeks. I was dreaming the delicious food that always escapes my grasp. My one desire was within my reach. I'm going to get it his time, just a second more. I started to feel the blankets around my body. No, just a moment more and I'll be able to know what that food is! It was right there I could almost reach it. I awoke to the sound of my stomach roaring with hunger. Damn, I almost had it that time.

I looked over and saw my wife, Karen, staring back at me like I was a subpoena presented after the funeral of a loved one.

"I expect you will want breakfast before you go to your dead-end job." she said as she rose and wrapped her robe around herself. She looked like a burrito to me. God, I was hungry.

"I'm dead set on figuring out what food it is I crave. I have to know, or I won't be able to go on," I said to her.

"Would it kill you to put a whole sentence together for once? I can't understand you anymore," she said, slamming shut the bedroom door.

I just didn't know what she meant. I thought I was being clear. I prepared myself for work, which took a long time, because I always feel like such a stiff in the mornings. While I showered and dressed myself, I couldn't shake the feeling that something big was going to happen to me that day. Whether good or bad, I couldn't tell.

As I brushed my teeth, I thought about what my boss would say to me when I got to work. The same thing he says every day. I can just hear him now, "Mort, you're dead weight around here. One of these days I'm going to bury you." I heard a clinking sound, and looked down in time to see one of my teeth as it circled the drain before it fell in. Just one today, maybe it will be a good day.

My stomach was violently bullying the rest of my organs by the time I entered the kitchen. I had such a hunger, but for what I couldn't tell. Seating myself at the breakfast table I noticed Karen

slip her cell phone into her robe's pocket.
She stood over the stove cooking, and without looking at me said, "I tried something new this time, maybe your highness will find it fit for ingestion, or if not, as has become the custom, I'll throw it out back for the crows."

I looked out the kitchen window, and see fifteen crows on the porch. They had started coming around in the last few weeks when I stopped being able stomach Karen's cooking.

"There are two more since yesterday," I said.

"You're always mumbling and groaning, you never use your words anymore," she said as she walked over and placed the freshly cooked food in front of me. I couldn't tell what it was, because as she came closer her head changed into a plump-looking cantaloupe. My mouth began to water, and my stomach punched my spine.

"I had better get going before traffic turns into a dead lock." I said as I got up without touching the breakfast. Out of the corner of my good eye I saw the crows go nuts.

"There you go again not saying anything. Just moaning and wheezing. You think you can just walk all over me," she said. "By the end of the day, my life is going to change, and your life, well I mean, things will change for you too!"

"I don't know what you mean. Can't you hear me?" I said.

"Fine, don't say anything then. You know ever since you became a " Karen's cell phone rang and she answered it with a sweet, "Hello."
I got in my car and started out for work. As I backed down the driveway Karen's words were running circles in my head. I couldn't figure out what she meant. What have I become? I feel the same, mostly. My skin feels less like it did, but I'm not a young man anymore. Before I headed out to the highway I gave a look back to my house and saw Karen looking back at me from the window. I waved goodbye and she shot me a bird.

The drive to work went by in a blur of traffic lights, near fatal collisions, and brain cell-killing radio. I arrived fifteen minutes early in order to be on time as the elevator had been broken for a week, and I had to climb up the fifteen flights of stairs to get to my office. As I ascended I began to think of who my wife could've been on the phone with this morning. Come to think of it, she has been on the phone more often than ever lately. Always quick to hang it up when I come in the room. I don't think she is cheating on me.

She wouldn't, would she?

Just as I sat down at my desk I heard what I knew was coming. My boss yelled, "Mort, you're dead weight around here, and today I bury you." Wait that isn't right, is he firing me?

"You're done, Mort. I want you out before lunch!"

"Please, Mr. Woodson, don't do this. Why would you?" I asked.

"That's all you can manage, some pitiful moans? Just take a look at this report you turned in last week."

My ex-boss held up an official looking form and scrawled in thick red letters all over it was the word BRAINS.

"What the hell is this? Some sort of joke? Well I'll tell you what, it's not fun "

He broke off as his cell phone began to ring. He looked at it, then at me, smiled and walked away.

I didn't know what the hell it was either, but I felt like I had been punched in the gut. I looked at my desk and on every piece of paper there had written on it the same thing, BRAINS in red letters. I felt hungry. How couldn't I have noticed? I got out of there as fast as possible. I felt like my world was falling apart.

I got in my car and went to the park. Alone on a bench I tried to make sense of it all. Had I been blocking it out? I thought back to when I first started to feel different. Karen and I had been walking back from a movie when a mugger had bitten me. That was when it all had started. After that I couldn't eat Karen's cooking anymore. My teeth started to fall out. I didn't think much of it then, but wait. The realization came crashing down on me. I was a dead man. I was a living dead man. I looked at my hands. They were green and rotting.

"I'm a zombie." I said.

Well my feeling this morning was right. A big change indeed. I felt relieved. All these past weeks I had known in the back of my mind, but I had been suppressing it. It felt so good to finally be true to myself. I had to tell Karen. I reached for my phone to call her, but it began to ring before I reached it. The caller ID said it was Karen. What good luck. I answered it.

"Karen, I have something I need to tell you!" I excitedly told her.

"Shut your mouth, and listen to me you sack of maggots," she screamed. "Mort, I'm divorcing you. Your boss is going to move in with me, so you will need to find another place to stay. I'm

changing the locks so don't bother coming back. Mort, the deal was until death do us part."

She ended the call. I didn't know what to do. I just sat on the bench and watched the sun go down, and felt my hunger grow. I was about to leave when I noticed a bright red convertible pull in the parking lot. A man and women got out. He started to shake his fist at her, and screamed in her face. Then he got back in the car and left in a flash. The women stood there all alone. She looked over and noticed me. Slowly she started to shuffle in my direction. It took her a moment, but when she was closer I could tell that she was a zombie. She had brown hair that was patchy and down to her shoulders, with skin the color of dying grass, and her left ankle was twisted. She came right up to me and lifted her hand.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," I replied.

"I like the way your voice sounds." She lowered her hand, and clasped her hands behind her back.

"You can understand me?" I was in disbelief, both that she could understand me and how attracted to her I was. I never found rotting flesh alluring before then.

"Sure, why not?"

"Well it seems like no one understands me these days."

"You don't sound like you've had a good day. What's wrong?"

Where should I start? I don't want to run her off with my tail of woe. "Today is the first day of my new life, and I guess I'm not all the way over my old one.

That guy back there didn't seem too nice. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, he didn't share in my dream, so I knew he wouldn't make me happy anyway."

"I don't feel too happy."

"Did you know the key to being happy is doing what you desire most? Also, if you can find someone who shares in your dream, then you should be with that person, because they are the one for you."

"What is your name?"

"Monica. What's yours?"

"Mine is Mort. Monica, I want to ask you something that I never thought I would say. So I'm just going to go for it. Would you like to go eat people's brains with me?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

I stood and took Monica by the hand. The next few days were filled with gallons of blood, unimaginable gore, and the most romantic moments of my life. We ate the brains of everyone we could get our hands on, starting with my ex-wife and ex-boss. It was my dream comes true. Monica and I were inseparable after that. I felt fulfilled in so many ways, and my burning hunger was gone.

A few weeks later we found ourselves back at the park where we met.

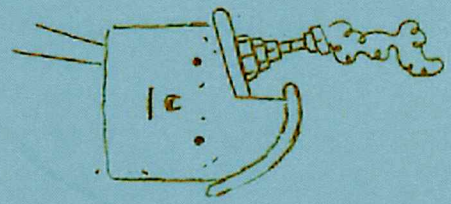
"Monica, this may seem a little soon to be asking, but would you like to have kids with me?" I asked.

"I would love to, Mort. As many as we can," she said.

So, hand in hand, we walked towards the playground full of children, and I was never happier in my life, or after.

I would like to thank all of those who offered their interests and efforts in The Tower interest meetings. The motivation it took to create this would not have been strong enough without you all. I also thank last year's editor-in-chief, Courtney Bennett for guidance through the process. This journal is a presentation provided by efforts across the entire University of Montevallo. Students included in this issue come from all sorts of majors, lifestyles, backgrounds, meanings and voices. I am proud to be able to publish such a diverse voice. These works provide a certain experience—one that is specific to this time, these people, and this university. I believe this is a collection of work, which accurately reflects those who submitted their works as well as the University as a whole.

We have collectively shown the power that creative and conscious endeavors can provide to a community. We are a self-aware, active, unique presence in the world. When go to school, we are students. When we create art, we are humans. Thank you all for contributing and reading. The Tower is a wonderful tradition and I am so thankful for this opportunity. I hope the tradition continues for many more years. Thank you all. Take more walks, look at the top of trees, and notice how the passage of light is controlled by your glide.

Thank you,

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